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Irresponsible remarks

PML-N LEADER and former speaker of the National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq has triggered a controversy by stating on the floor of the National Assembly that the PTI government had released captured Indian pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan under pressure of an Indian attack. He said Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi had said this in a meeting of parliamentary leaders in the wake of Pakistan's shooting down of the Indian aircraft. The statement has created a furore as a result of which the DG ISPR has had to deliver a televised statement denying the former speaker's claim. The military spokesman made it clear Pakistan had achieved victory over India in this post-Balakot conflict and had released the captured pilot as an illustration of its mature strategic restraint. The spokesman said this gesture by Pakistan was appreciated at the international level.

There is no doubt that the statement by the PML-N leader is irresponsible and it would have been far better had he not made it. One expects someone of his experience and political profile to have weighed the potential consequences of his words before uttering them in public. These words are now being exploited by India to dilute the impact of Pakistan's comprehensive domination of last year's conflict. It also does not behove a senior politician like him to violate the confidentiality of high-level meetings. It is unlikely that the government would have released the Indian prisoner under any pressure. That said, there is no harm in having a public debate about whether this was the right step to take at this moment. A case could be built that Pakistan should have held on to the prisoner for some time. Indulging in such a debate does no harm.

Meanwhile, the government's reaction to Ayaz Sadiq's statement is troubling. It is understandable for politicians to exploit their rivals' mistake, but what cannot be condoned is questioning their patriotic credentials. Yet this is what the PTI government is doing consistently. The federal information minister has gone to the extreme of equating the opposition with an 'axis of evil' including India and Israel. In line with this unfortunate strategy, posters have appeared in the streets of Lahore accusing Ayaz Sadiq of treason. The government must have them removed forthwith because such crude tactics amount to an incitement to violence. In fact, in recent months the political discourse has degenerated to a dangerously volatile level. Hurling charges of treason against one's political rivals

and smearing them with pro-India labels is wrong at every level. It demeans politics and its practitioners and it opens up deep fault lines that can rupture the system from the inside. It is sad to see that politicians have not learnt lessons from their mistakes of the past and continue to treat politics as a zero-sum game.

Dangerous path

ONCE more the fires of Islamophobia have been lit, setting off an ugly series of events that have put the Muslim and Western worlds on a collision course. This time again the trigger was blasphemous images of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), published in France. Following the republication and display of these in a French classroom by a teacher, the educator was murdered while three people were killed in a separate attack on a Nice church.

Unfortunately, French President Macron's combative rhetoric in the aftermath of the controversy has not helped matters. Instead of addressing the issue in a statesmanlike fashion, Mr Macron has held forth in a neocolonial fashion about the 'crisis' Islam faces.

This has led to certain questionable reactions from some in the Muslim world; former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad in a blog post wrote that Muslims had a right to be "angry and kill millions of French people for the massacres of the past". Such a response from a senior statesman is bound to raise eyebrows. Our own prime minister's response to the growing crisis has been mature; Imran Khan has called for unity among the Muslim world to "collectively counter Islamophobia in non-Muslim states".

Indeed, among non-Muslim leaders Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has given a very balanced reaction to the ballooning crisis. Observing that while he defended freedom of expression, it is "not without limits" and should not "arbitrarily and needlessly hurt" certain communities. Certainly, Emmanuel Macron can learn a thing or two about how to compassionately handle delicate matters from Mr Trudeau.

The fact is that efforts are needed on both sides — within the Islamic world and in the West — to prevent an increase in divisive rhetoric and extremism. Some in the West have unfortunately taken it upon themselves to consistently attack Islam's most sacred personality under the cover of freedom of expression. Those

who support this ignore the ugly history of orientalism and later colonialism, under which Islam's sacred symbols were constantly attacked. It seems under the guise of so-called secularism the old tribal, religious hatreds live on. And while murder cannot be condoned, if such provocations continue, extremists will continue to find willing recruits to carry out acts of violence.

If questioning a historical event such as the Holocaust can be outlawed by keepers of the West's morality, then surely measures can be taken to prevent public attacks on the faith of over a billion people.

Saleem Asmi

SALEEM Asmi, a former Dawn editor, died late Friday night after a long and courageous struggle against infirmity and pneumonia. He had been wheelchair-bound for a long time but continued to keep his chin up and carry out his social commitments. An experienced journalist who began his career as a young reporter at the Pakistan Times, Lahore, Asmi served in other newspapers also, including the prestigious Dubai daily Khaleej Times, where he was news editor, and finally in Dawn where he was editor from 2000 to 2003. At Dawn he oversaw the launching of three colour magazines — covering science, art (he was an avid art collector with a discerning eye) and book reviews. He also detached the city pages from the main edition and turned them into separate forms. His colleagues were unanimous in their opinion about his qualities as a team leader and his ability to take quick decisions in situations that journalists the world over face as the deadline nears and stories crash into newsrooms to compete for page-one space.

As KT news editor, he overshadowed the editor by his brilliance at page makeup, his succinct headlines capturing the essence of the story and news management. He kept his reporters on their toes and the desk staff on the alert when he learnt from his sources about some news that was going to break. Since Asmi had begun his career as a reporter, he knew a reporter's strengths and weaknesses. Firm but polite, he had the ability to inspire his colleagues by making broad decisions and soothing runaway nerves. Yet he was a disciplinarian and never failed to come down hard on the recalcitrant. Never afraid of pressures from state and non-state actors, Asmi showed courage in the display of news. It was also his commitment to press freedom that took him to prison during the strike

organised by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists when a military government was in power. May he rest in peace.

America's choice

THE United States is gearing up for a poll verdict on Nov 3 in what is arguably one of the most crucial and unconventional elections in the country's history. Although the world doesn't have to wait long for the results of the poll, whoever becomes the next US president — Republican candidate Donald Trump or Democratic candidate Joe Biden — it is evident that this election is taking place at a very critical moment in history.

Americans have to make a critical decision that will have significant repercussions for not just national politics but also global issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, superpower relations and the climate emergency. Excitement is at an all-time high and can be gauged by the record number of voters who turned up in states where early voting is taking place. Official tallies suggest that more than 80m Americans have already cast their ballot, a turnout which sets the stage for America's highest participation rate in over a century — all against the backdrop of the pandemic, an economic recession and the country's deeply polarised and acrimonious politics.

In the months leading up to the election, the American people have been divided over whether they want to see the current president — and his performance over the last four years — continue. But as we await their choice, it is important to reflect on how disastrous and divisive the Trump presidency has been.

Mr Trump and his administration have ignited fires on multiple fronts and have been on the wrong side of far too many rights issues. His term has seen unprecedented discrimination against immigrants, heated racial tensions and the highest number of Covid-19 cases and deaths in the world. On the foreign policy front, Mr Trump has escalated tensions with China, pulled out of a nuclear deal with Iran and unsuccessfully tried to reinvent Middle East politics. In one particularly shocking moment soon after he was elected, Mr Trump pulled out of the 2015 Paris Agreement — a culmination of his persistent denial of the climate threat which has far-reaching consequences for humanity.

The tense environment in the US is not likely to ease in the coming days — especially in the event that Mr Trump does not win, as he has categorically talked about electoral fraud and said he won't commit to leaving the White House even if he loses. Not only has he said he suspects fraud at the polls, he has criticised mail-in ballots and cast doubt over their legitimacy.

By sowing distrust in the result ahead of election day on Nov 3, Mr Trump is setting the stage for a potential constitutional crisis that America has never witnessed before. It is in this charged atmosphere that Americans are voting to decide the future of their country and also the world as it confronts huge challenges to the environment, democracy, journalism, free speech and identity.

Rao Anwar's trial

THE trial of retired SSP Malir Rao Anwar in the Naqeebullah Mehsud murder case is emblematic of a dysfunctional state where those with the right connections can seemingly commit heinous acts with impunity. In a recent development, yet another prosecution witness has retracted his statement in court. It was nearly three years ago on Jan 13, 2018, that the 27-year-old was gunned down in cold blood along with three other individuals in an abandoned farmhouse in Karachi's Malir district. The police declared that the three men were Taliban militants who had been killed in an 'encounter'. The reality was quite different. Naqeebullah was an aspiring model; in fact none of the victims even had a criminal record. Their murder was the latest in a hideous saga of police brutality in which Rao Anwar played a leading role. Under him, Malir had been the staging ground for an improbable number of police encounters in the past few years; so much so that the cop was often referred to as an 'encounter specialist'. According to the police's own record, it emerged later that Rao Anwar had been involved in 444 extrajudicial killings. The situation was all the more remarkable for the fact that no cops ever seemed to sustain any injuries in these 'shoot-outs' and yet, there was not a single investigation into them.

Naqeebullah's murder, however, touched a nerve. Public pressure, led by his friends and family — most of all by his dignified, stoic father, Mohammed Khan — led to Rao Anwar and 17 other cops finally being charged with the killing in March 2019. But by then it had become clear that the now retired police official was above the law, as unaccountable as his alleged backers. Instead of being

detained in jail, he was confined for a short time to the comfort of his own home, conveniently declared a sub-jail on flimsy pretexts. Whenever he arrived for a court hearing, he did so without handcuffs and was given full protocol — a far cry from the treatment that ‘ordinary’ accused are meted out. In July, two key prosecution witnesses turned hostile. Naqeebullah’s father had been receiving threats for pursuing the case; in the end, he died of cancer in December 2019, still awaiting justice. Rao Anwar’s trial could have been a chance to set right a terrible injustice, and chart a new course for the police. Sadly, it seems that day is still far off.

Fertiliser subsidy

THE federal government’s decision to allow a subsidy of Rs5.4bn on diammonium phosphate, or DAP, fertiliser will help reduce the input costs of wheat farmers. According to the finance ministry, the government has approved a subsidy of Rs1,000 per 50kg bag of DAP, which will reduce its price by 25pc. The DAP subsidy is part of the prime minister’s special package for the growers to be approved by the federal cabinet next Tuesday. The subsidy was announced two days after some ministers raised concerns over the rising prices of food, especially of wheat flour, at a recent cabinet meeting and the absence of an administrative response. The total value of the package is estimated to be Rs24bn and it includes an increase in the wheat support price from Rs1,400 per 40kg to Rs1,600 per 40kg and subsidy on fungicides and weedicides in addition to DAP. The fertiliser subsidy will be paid from the Rs50bn earmarked for the agriculture sector in the Rs1.2tr fiscal stimulus package given to fight the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Only a fifth of the money allocated for agriculture could be spent until now.

It is encouraging to see the government realising the impact of consistently rising input costs on farmers’ meagre incomes and spiralling food inflation on consumers. The actions being taken will help the growers cut the overall cost of their inputs and boost their incomes. But it will not help control food prices surging since August last year. The solution to the higher food prices demands an overhaul of existing agriculture policies and investment in new high-yield technology. If the wheat growers, for example, are able to double their output per acre, it will not only halve their costs and substantially increase their incomes but also bring down wheat prices in the market. Also, the increased yields will spare

a part of cultivable land under wheat for growing other value-added crops and vegetables. Thus the government should focus more on revamping policies than fiscally unsustainable subsidies.

Escalating tension

THE political situation in the country is getting tenser by the day. The anti-government campaign by the opposition alliance, the Pakistan Democratic Movement, has raised the temperature and triggered a fierce reaction from the government. The war of words is escalating dangerously and the nature of mutual accusations is getting inflammatory. On Sunday, while addressing a gathering in GB, Prime Minister Imran Khan used harsh language against the opposition and once again accused them of promoting the enemy's narrative. He lashed out at them for criticising the chiefs of the army and ISI, saying this proved that he had appointed the right people. The prime minister also dangerously insinuated that the statement by PML-N leader Sardar Ayaz Sadiq amounted to treason. On almost similar lines — and perhaps more dangerous — was the statement issued by Interior Minister Ijaz Shah. In a speech in his constituency, the retired brigadier said the outlawed terrorist group TTP had in reaction to the ANP's policies on terrorism attacked and killed many of its leaders, adding he prayed for the safety of those following the PML-N narrative. These remarks were widely seen as threatening in nature and condemned vociferously by opposition parties.

There is a trend evident here. The top leadership of the PTI is increasingly resorting to rhetoric that is both irresponsible and dangerous. Equating opponents with the enemy's narrative, hurling accusations of treason and warning of a blowback from terror groups — all this can amount to incitement to violence. It is shocking that people occupying offices of responsibility are indulging in such crude tactics to pressure their opponents. It appears the government has adopted a no-holds-barred approach towards the opposition regardless of the consequences this may accrue. It is perhaps in line with such a strategy that the PTI has decided to hold public rallies to counter the campaign launched by the PDM. The first rally is scheduled to be held in Hafizabad and the prime minister is expected to address it. This will further fuel tension and escalate the level of confrontation. With both the government and opposition hitting the

streets and increasing the tempo of their rhetoric, the situation seems primed for some mishap.

It is a pity that in this deadly game of one-upmanship no one is willing to take a step back. There is no individual, organisation or institution that can step in the middle and disengage political rivals before they fall off the precipice. What makes this of greater concern are the charged times we live in. The Gilgit-Baltistan elections later this month are providing all parties a platform to ratchet up their rhetoric, and in another two weeks the PDM will resume its jalsas. Sanity must prevail on all sides before the situation reaches a point that becomes unsustainable for our already weak and compromised system.

Wrong message

COVID-19 cases across the country are rising at a dangerous pace, with the official coronavirus-related death toll in the last week alone close to 100. The situation is growing worrisome as ministers sound the alarm over a positivity ratio which has crossed the 3pc mark and is continuing to escalate. In Islamabad, daily positive Covid-19 cases are growing at an alarming rate, spurring the administration into imposing Section 144 and making mask-wearing mandatory in public. In Peshawar, another doctor succumbed to the virus last week, taking KP's virus-related death toll among the medical community to a shocking 20. As the virus spreads, the National Command and Operation Centre is mulling measures to curb transmission while limiting damage to economic activity in the country. Alarm is evident — as it should be — from the federal government's hotline initiative through which citizens can call and report others for violating SOPs.

It is beginning to look like a long, dark winter for Pakistan. Despite the success of lowering the curve in the first phase of the pandemic in the country, officials at the helm of our Covid-19 response have been late to act against the second wave. A basic Covid-19 SOP such as mask-wearing became mandatory only in recent weeks when it should have been enforced strictly at the federal and provincial level from day one — especially given that Pakistan opened up business months ago to heal a battered economy. Now, with cases spreading rapidly in communities and with daily testing below 30,000, a nightmare situation is starting to unfold where authorities will be forced to consider restricting

economic activities to save lives. As respiratory illnesses spike in the smog season, Covid-19 hospitalisations will become an even bigger challenge for the medical community. In this environment, the idea that huge political rallies will continue to take place is unfathomable. While the opposition parties took the lead in holding these superspreader events, the government also made the logic-defying decision to hold a large public rally of its own. This sends the wrong message and negates what government ministers and advisers are themselves saying about the need to curb the virus. Instead of attempting to showcase its own popularity, the government should spend its energy on battling the virus as well as the myriad other challenges it is facing, which include food insecurity and a power and gas crisis — which will likely worsen as Covid-19 cases escalate.

IHK land laws

AMONGST the more sinister components of the Indian government's move to rescind Kashmiri autonomy last year was the green light given to Indians to buy land in the disputed region. Kashmiris fear this will allow non-locals to flood the held region and transform the demographic profile of the area, in effect creating 'facts on the ground', much as illegal Israeli settlers have done in the occupied territories. There was a widespread shutdown in IHK on Saturday to protest the new land laws, which have recently taken effect, with businesses closed as a mark of protest. Kashmiri leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq had given the strike call to protest India's "policy of permanent demographic change" in the occupied region.

While doing away with held Kashmir's flag and constitution were blatant moves by India to smother Kashmiris' desire for freedom and a just solution to the decades-old conflict, letting outsiders buy land in the occupied region hits the area's people particularly hard. It allows those from outside the region with deep pockets to buy Kashmiris' homes and businesses, in effect paving the way for locals to one day be converted into a minority in their own land. While pro-freedom Kashmiris have resolutely denounced these moves, even some of New Delhi's closest allies in the occupied region have distanced themselves from India's colonial actions designed to dilute the Kashmiri identity. Allowing non-locals to buy land is a recipe for disaster and will damage the demographic character of IHK beyond repair. Instead of resorting to controversial moves such as these, the BJP-led government must listen to the voices coming out of held Kashmir, demanding dignity and protection of their fundamental rights. Kashmiris

are the masters of their land and destiny and no legal subterfuge can change that. Better sense should prevail and India should do away with the new land laws, or else a new wave of resentment is likely in IHK — one that will be difficult for India to suppress.

Kabul University slaughter

WHILE hopes remain that violence in Afghanistan will one day come to an end, specifically if the government, the Afghan Taliban and other major stakeholders reach a peace agreement, civilians in that unfortunate country continue to pay a high price due to the lawlessness.

On Monday, a massacre occurred at Kabul University, in which at least 22 people lost their lives. The militant Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the atrocity saying two of its fighters carried out the assault, apparently to target an Afghan government ceremony at the varsity.

Late last month, IS carried out a similar massacre, targeting an education centre in a Shia-majority area of Kabul. In that attack, at least 24 lives were snuffed out, many of them young students hoping to build a better future.

While these attacks rightfully attract revulsion, they are par for the course where IS's deadly strategy and tactics are concerned. After all, they combine the terrorist group's virulently sectarian outlook and its hatred of modernity, education and all interpretations of religion and politics other than its own.

Moreover, the attacks illustrate the frailty of the Kabul government; the two recent assaults did not take place in some faraway, barely governed province. They took place in the Afghan capital, which is supposed to have a heavy security presence. This shows that unless a solid Afghan peace agreement is hammered out and put into practice, as soon as foreign forces leave the country IS and its ideological comrades may carry out even greater acts of violence.

Along with threatening Afghanistan's security, a revitalised IS using ungoverned Afghan soil as a base will become a regional and international security nightmare. Pakistan has legitimate security concerns regarding this possible scenario, while as numerous IS-inspired attacks over the last few days in different parts of the world show, if militants find a stronghold in Afghanistan, the frequency and ferocity of these attacks may increase too.

A two-fold response is needed to control IS terrorism within Afghanistan. First and foremost is the need, as stated above, for all Afghan factions that believe in the political process to single-mindedly work for a peace plan agreeable to all. Though the level of violence between the Afghan Taliban and the government has been high over the past couple of weeks, both these players must realise that if IS is given space, it will not hesitate to eliminate all that stands in its way of recreating a 'caliphate'. Secondly, some Afghan officials have blamed the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan for Monday's attack. This is strange as IS has unambiguously claimed it was behind the assault. Instead of hurling unsubstantiated allegations, the Afghan government must work with regional states and the international community to eliminate the IS threat. Pointing fingers at others will not make the threat go away.

Forced conversion

AN important case is being heard at the Sindh High Court, one that has a critical bearing on the rights of minorities, particularly the thorny question of religious conversion when it goes hand in hand with underage marriage.

A Christian girl named Arzoo recently sought a court injunction to prevent the registration of a kidnapping case against a man with whom she had undergone a nikah ceremony, and his family. She had claimed in an affidavit that she was 18 years of age and was 'marrying' him after converting to Islam of her own free will.

However, apparently incontrovertible documentary evidence has emerged that shows Arzoo is a 13-year-old child. On Monday night, the police said they had arrested the purported 'husband', recovered the girl and were moving her to a shelter home for three days as ordered by the court.

There have been many incidents over the past few years in which families of girls from minority communities, usually Hindus living in interior Sindh, have alleged that their daughters were forcibly converted before being married to Muslim men. More often than not, the 'brides' are underage girls.

According to the law, the minimum age for marriage in Sindh is 18 years; there are no exceptions or mitigating circumstances. The Child Marriages Restraint Act mandates prison terms and fines for the male contracting party as well as those who perform the nikah or in any way facilitate such a union.

The problem seems to arise, however, when religious conversion is involved. At present there is no law providing for a minimum age of conversion. In 2016, a bill was introduced in the Sindh Assembly stipulating 18 years as the minimum age for such a profound, life-changing decision.

But when the religious lobby created a furore, the PPP government shamefully capitulated and the law was never enacted, leaving this critical issue concerning the minorities' fundamental rights far from settled, and dependent on a case-by-case interpretation.

Almost always thus far, despite the law on underage marriage, the courts have been inclined to look the other way if the girl claims her conversion was according to her will, and allowed her to go with her purported spouse. The inequality of social and political power between the two parties is an important factor in this pattern, as is the pressure exerted in an atmosphere of growing religiosity, where true free will in matters of faith scarcely exists.

Second turns

THE feeling elsewhere in the government may not yet be one of rapid transformation but change is constant in the information ministry of Punjab. Four turns have already been played, and now we have Dr Firdous Ashiq Awan taking things into her able hands from Fayyazul Hasan Chohan. The outgoing minister was generous with directing his most piercing lines — many of them in the form of crude one-liners — against the PTI government's opponents. It is unclear as to what then prompted this, the second ouster of Mr Chohan, from his position as provincial information minister. It was Mr Chohan who had set the tone for the inaugural PTI government in Punjab with his forceful public rejection and dismissal from sight of anything which he considered even remotely coming in the way of his leader Imran Khan's vision. Back then, he had to be replaced after he made derogatory remarks about a minority community.

However, both the successors of this original choice for the coveted post proved rather subdued. After Samsam Bukhari was unable to weave his magic and the gamble of trying out Mian Aslam Iqbal, otherwise thought to be chief ministerial material, failed to pay off, Mr Chohan was drafted in as information minister for the second time and looked safe and secure and prepared for a long stint. That perception proved to be wrong, and the heavens did not fall as Dr Firdous Ashiq

Awan emerged on the horizon on a dusky November evening as if blessed on her way to prominence again by some unseen sage. Ms Awan had bowed out in April, as a special assistant to the prime minister, an exit that could hardly be termed as ceremonious. She herself holds the key to the mystery about her new assignment as a reinforcement for Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar's administration. The secret will start to unravel as she speaks. One has to pay attention to the words and tone she chooses.

Rescuing industry

THE government's decision to slash electricity prices for all industrial users while announcing some additional incentives for small and medium enterprises could prove a life-saving measure for many. The industry was desperate for help because of the impact of Covid-19 and struggling to retain — and possibly increase — the share of the country's stagnating exports in international markets. The industrial energy package also anticipates a significant boost to domestic economic growth and employment as it will act as a major incentive for companies to once again operationalise their existing, idle production capacity. With electricity 25pc more expensive in Pakistan than in other countries in the region, our exporters had long been lagging behind their competitors in global markets. Some would argue that the energy bill of the firms is only one of the many factors responsible for jacking up their costs and affecting their competitiveness globally, yet the reduction in electricity rates is a move in the right direction. Now the government can focus on other issues such as taxation and labour productivity to enhance the country's industrial competitiveness and improve the quality of products.

The relief package eliminates peak hour rates from the electricity tariff of the entire industrial sector — a concession that in all fairness should also be extended to domestic consumers — and allows a 25pc relief in power bills on the additional consumption of units for the next three years. It further slashes the tariff for SMEs on the consumption of additional electricity to Rs8/KWh for 10 months, till June 30 next year. The package is estimated to cost the government around Rs20bn to Rs30bn, which is money well spent in light of the overall impact on the economy, growth, jobs, exports and taxes. Besides, the potential increase in power consumption will help the government utilise unused and idle generation capacity, especially during winter, as many companies which have

shifted to gas-based, cheaper captive power will now return to the national grid. Thus, the government should not find it very difficult to sell the package to the IMF with which it is negotiating to revive the \$6bn bailout package.

Apparently, the relief package is part of a larger plan to fix the country's inefficient and erratic power sector, liquidate the circular debt that has grown to Rs2.3tr, reduce the size of the annual fixed capacity payments of Rs900bn being made to the IPPs (the capacity payments are estimated to rise to Rs1,600bn by 2023 if nothing is done to contain and reduce them), and decentralise power distribution to the provinces by doing away with electricity subsidies and cross subsidies for different consumers. The ultimate objective is to create competitive wholesale and retail electricity markets in the country where consumers would have the option to switch from one retailer to another. The job may be quite difficult but it is not impossible.

New NSS rule

FOR many Pakistanis looking to park their hard-earned savings somewhere reliable, from where they can meet their periodic financial needs, National Savings Schemes are usually the investment of choice. Returns from these are not among the most lucrative but that is offset by the fact that they are comparatively low risk and less susceptible to the volatility of other investment avenues such as the stock market. Small and medium savers in their retirement years constitute a large pool of NSS investors. There is much consternation among these senior citizens in particular over the changes the government has recently made in the nominee rules for NSS, making the payout procedure vastly more cumbersome. The step has been taken to comply with a Sindh High Court judgement of Aug 23, 2016, ordering the payment of NSS dues to 'legal heirs' as required under the Muslim Law of Inheritance rather than to 'nominated persons'. According to the new procedure, the certificate purchaser/investor will no longer be able to designate a 'nominee' to whom the funds would go in the event of his/her death. Instead, the payment of the principal amount and the profit thereon, if any, would be disbursed to the legal heirs according to the succession certificate issued by a court in light of Sharia law.

The legal system in this country is already stretched way beyond its limited capacity; there is a backlog nearly 2m cases long and proceedings move at a

glacial pace, particularly in civil courts. This burden needs to be lightened, not added to. The new procedure would also constitute an unnecessary complication where there is no dispute over the payout among the legal heirs of a certificate purchaser/investor. This paper over the past few weeks has received numerous letters from readers expressing their distress over the change in rules. The circumstances of some of them are such they cannot but worry over what is certain to be an extended ordeal for their nominees after they themselves are gone. The Supreme Court should revisit the issue and take a view that is both compassionate and practical. One way out, which would achieve the same result as that desired by the government, is to go back to the nominee system but have this individual give an undertaking that he/she will, when the time comes, distribute the proceeds from the NSS in accordance with the inheritance law.

Stolen relics

THE return of 45 artefacts to Pakistani authorities in New York by the Manhattan district attorney's office should be a moment to celebrate. The relics are valued at around \$250,000 and include sculptures of the Buddha from the Gandhara period. The return of these artefacts follows a lengthy probe by the US Homeland Security Investigation office into the collection of Nayef Homsi, described as a "known trafficker involved in illegal looting, exportation and sale of ancient art from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and other countries". The Pakistani consulate in New York played a commendable role by pursuing the case of the artefacts and ensuring the return of these cultural and historical treasures.

However, it is an unfortunate fact that the trafficking of such significant relics continues to be a thriving business in the region. Equally regrettable is the lackadaisical attitude of the Pakistani authorities that have failed to clamp down on this illegal trade of antiquities and dismantle the network that sells heritage items to foreign art dealers. Given this disinterest, what will be the fate of these recovered items once they arrive in the country? Post-devolution confusion has added to the woes of conservation and management of antiquities in the country. KP and Punjab have passed their own amended versions of the Antiquities Act of 1975, but Sindh and Balochistan have lagged behind in formulating legislation to protect important heritage sites such as Mohenjodaro. Robust and updated laws and coordinated provincial action can help check the rampant pilferage of cultural items and address the current lack of clarity over ownership of cultural property

between the centre and the provinces. But laws alone will not protect archaeological heritage. The country's history predates the events of 1947 by centuries but this is not reflected in the approach of officialdom that has hardly attempted to create a sense of pride in the public. This must change if the secrets of long-buried civilisations are to be showcased as a sign that Pakistan can protect its own.

Polarised America

ELECTION night in America was eerily reminiscent of election night in Pakistan. The too-close-to-call contest between Republican candidate President Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Joe Biden is still not over, but the run-up to the verdict contains the same chaos, uncertainty and anxiety that rule our elections as well as polls held in countries where democracy is a relatively new concept.

Mr Trump's realisation that key Republican states were slipping away and turning blue triggered an outburst on social media, where in a flurry of provocative tweets he alleged electoral fraud, saying that deliberate attempts were being made to 'steal' the election from him. In one dramatic tweet, he "hereby claim[ed] victory in the battleground state of Michigan where projections from major news networks suggested Mr Biden had won — a post among others by Mr Trump that Twitter repeatedly flagged for violating its 'civic integrity policy' which maintains that the platform cannot be manipulated for interfering in elections.

As if it were not surreal enough that the social media platform was checking the incumbent president of the United States mid-election, Mr Trump's posts encouraged his supporters in some states to gather at polling centres to try and stop the vote-count process. In some places, stores boarded up their windows to brace for a wave of post-verdict violence.

Read: Did social media actually counter US election misinformation?

That these scenes are unfolding in America as it makes a crucial decision regarding its — and the world's — future speaks volumes for the state of American democracy. Mr Trump's presidency and re-election bid have exposed the fault lines in the American electoral system and shown how one individual can fan the flames of division and take an already polarised society to the edge.

Read: Trump erupts as Biden closes in on US presidency

The race — regardless of who wins — has held up a mirror to how divided the American people are. The two candidates are still neck and neck in some key states, with Team Biden dependent on the exhilaratingly close contest in Nevada where, at the time of writing, six electoral college votes could decide the future of the presidency. Regardless of whichever one scrapes through, it is evident that this election has split the country, with 72m voting one way and 68m the other.

If there is a silver lining to all this, it is that American citizens have turned out in record numbers to cast their vote. While a winner is still undetermined and the weeks ahead could see legal battles and an escalation of tensions over vote count, it is heartening that millions have exercised their right to vote because of an inherent belief in democracy. Still, the pall of uncertainty that hangs over the election begs a reflection of how America — a centuries-old democracy that has lectured many a developing nation on democratic processes — came to be in such a fragile position.

Reforming ‘kafala’

COUNTLESS Pakistanis who have worked in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are familiar with the kafala system. This system of ‘sponsorship’ severely restricts the freedoms foreign workers have in the kingdom, basically with the kafeel or sponsor having the final say in when and if the worker can leave or travel outside the country, or change jobs. Due to its very nature it is open to abuse, with sponsors/employers keeping workers’ travel documents, and everyone — from executives to blue-collar workers — in one form or the other beholden to the kafeel. However, as announced recently by Saudi officials, the kingdom is set to revamp the system to make it more transparent and worker-friendly. According to Saudi officials, the changes, due to take effect from next year, will allow foreign workers to change jobs and travel from Saudi Arabia without their employer’s permission.

No doubt many foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, and those hoping to tap the kingdom’s labour market, will welcome these proposals. Over a million Pakistanis work in the kingdom, and these changes to Saudi labour laws will be keenly followed in this country. As it is currently being practised, the kafala system is outdated and not in line with modern labour laws. In worst-case scenarios, the kafeel can act like a slave driver, and there are few forums for foreign workers to

complain to in the kingdom. Usually, the odds are stacked against foreigners, with Saudi authorities rarely giving workers from outside the kingdom a sympathetic ear. Hopefully, the proposed reforms will change this. The Saudis have initiated these changes “to improve Saudi Arabia’s labour market attractiveness”, as one official in the kingdom put it. Those who rule Riyadh are looking to diversify the kingdom’s economy away from petrochemicals, and for this they need both a qualified Saudi workforce, as well as foreign labour. However, to attract the best and most able foreign workers there must be visible changes to the Saudi labour market, and reforming kafala is the ideal place to start. Human rights organisations have said the proposed changes are welcome, but not enough, and that Riyadh must do away with the sponsorship system totally. This may be too much to ask, but ideally Saudi planners must aim to create a labour market that conforms with international regimes where workers, foreign and local, have all the rights the ILO and international conventions guarantee.

Farmers’ protest

THE story of the protesting farmers of Punjab takes on an even more depressing tone as news of the possible consequences of police action in Lahore makes the rounds. One demonstrator, who was rushed to hospital after the police used water cannons and batons to disperse the farmers, was reported dead on Thursday. This threatens to change the tone and tenor of an already tense campaign. Punjab’s farmers are demonstrating mainly for what they call a fair price for their wheat. They are being offered Rs1,600 per 40 kg for their produce but they have before them the example of Sindh which has fixed the price at Rs2,000 per 40 kg. How an apparently less resourceful unit of the federation is going to sustain the high costs of wheat is in itself a big question. But as far as sympathies and political constituencies go, these growers have attracted support from some big names in Punjab as well — among them Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi. As speaker of the provincial assembly, he happens to be the custodian of the house in front of which the government of Sardar Usman Buzdar unleashed violence on a group that was hardly expecting such an urban reception.

The search for those who ordered the use of brute force against the demonstrators was on 24 hours later amid allegations that the water dispersed had some chemical content. Just as the news of the death of a protester, said to

be an office-bearer of a farmers' organisation, came in, there were hasty official vows to find a quick solution to demands for increasing the wheat price. But it's one of the toughest problems to solve. Given the amount of panic on display and a guilty conscience, even a sincere desire to resolve the issue can at best provide only the start of a process that may be long and taxing. There has to be a dialogue across provinces to ensure that there is not too much discrepancy in prices of an essential item such as wheat in the country.

Growing debt

THE government's failure to seriously tackle the menace of circular debt is now threatening to pull down the profitable public-sector oil and gas firms. In a call for help, the Petroleum Division has warned the government of a looming energy crisis unless steps are taken to resolve the cash troubles of companies like PSO, OGDCL, PPL, Pakistan LNG Ltd, SNGPL and SSGC emanating from power-sector debt. These firms are owed Rs1.6tr and face a bleak future unless their financial troubles caused by non-payment of their dues from the power sector, refineries and gas sector are taken care of very quickly.

"Inaction can lead to the collapse of some of the otherwise profitable entities, causing a major disruption in the supply chain. They are at the stage that they might resort to ceasing supply of crude oil, furnace oil, LNG and gas in the foreseeable future," the Petroleum Division letter to the Economic Coordination Committee warns. Further, it says, the increase in the financial cost arising from delayed recovery from the power sector is adversely affecting the profitability of PSEs with the risk of bad debts resulting in possible bankruptcy. In response, the ECC has set up yet another committee for working out the modalities of tackling the debt issue holistically and averting a possible collapse of the state-owned entities. The panel has been instructed by the ECC to prepare a "well-rounded" proposal to settle the issue in the next one month.

The committee is likely to also consider the Power Division's proposals for adjustment of the debt. Some of the suggested solutions could ultimately punish consumers for the failure of the government to fix the energy sector. The division has, for example, proposed a new levy on gas prices for settlement of the SSGC and SNGPL debt. It has also sought permission for OGDCL, PPL and GHPL to discharge their obligations of sales tax and royalty payments on the 'collect-and-

pay' model as temporary relief, and issue large chunks of Sukuk against the entire debt amount. Additionally, it has suggested the settlement of gas development surcharge payable by PPL on gas sales to generation companies through adjustments against its receivables. The Petroleum Division has also sought adjustment of debt with equity in profitable PSEs, power projects and companies in the energy supply chain. These proposals may tackle the financial troubles of the energy suppliers and distributors, but the larger problem of circular debt in the power industry will remain. The liquidation of the existing debt stock of Rs2.3tr is crucial to ensure the industry's sustainability. But that will be futile unless inefficient power distribution companies are reformed to stop the future flow of debt, electricity demand is increased to help cut capacity payment charges and prices are reduced to encourage industrialisation for growth and employment. The government has taken a few steps in this direction. But it still has a long way to go.

Imprisoned abroad

BEING incarcerated anywhere is not a pleasant experience. However, if one has the misfortune to end up in jail in a foreign country with little knowledge of the local language and laws, the miseries multiply exponentially. This is often the case with Pakistani workers imprisoned in the Gulf states, where language barriers and opaque legal systems mean that getting home even after completing the sentence is an ordeal. In this regard, the recent return of 41 Pakistanis serving time in Sri Lankan jails is welcome; the convicts will now serve the remainder of their sentences in local facilities. However, many thousands more Pakistanis imprisoned abroad are not as lucky. According to rights group Justice Project Pakistan, over 11,000 Pakistanis are currently in overseas penitentiaries. As the group has highlighted, over 2,000 Pakistanis remain in Saudi jails. And while the prime minister had requested the Saudi crown prince last year to release these inmates, "the promise ... is yet to be fulfilled".

Indeed, those who commit heinous crimes abroad must pay the penalty as per the local laws. However, the fact remains that in many cases, Pakistanis don't get fair trials in foreign countries, while many are also hauled up for minor offences such as traffic accidents or other misdemeanours. Because they don't always have access to their counsel of choice, and are barely aware of local regulations, these individuals end up serving long, harsh sentences for minor

infractions. And as activists point out, many individuals — often those travelling abroad for the first time — are duped by unscrupulous employment agents and ‘deceived’ into trafficking drugs. In many Gulf states, drug trafficking is punishable by death. While efforts have been made by the state, more needs to be done to bring back Pakistanis serving time abroad, or to convince foreign states to allow convicts to serve the remainder of their terms in this country. That way, at least they will have access to family. Moreover, those Pakistanis travelling abroad for work — especially for the first time — must be educated before they board the plane about the regulations of their host country, so that they steer clear of violating the law. And in case citizens do end up having run-ins with foreign law-enforcement agencies, local Pakistani missions must ensure they have access to counsels well aware of the host country’s legal system. These workers deserve better than to be left to rot in foreign prisons indefinitely.

The Khushab example

THE killing of a bank manager in the Punjab town of Khushab once again underscores how murder is so easily ‘justified’ on the basis of mere accusations and whipped-up public sentiment. However, this time we also saw a rare example of people coming together to foil an attempt to hastily lend a religious colour to an alleged crime. According to initial reports, the bank manager was shot by an irate security guard after an altercation over alleged blasphemy and the attacker was now celebrating his actions. Then it was said that the attack was sectarian; this was followed by strong rumours suggesting that both the victim and the attacker belonged to the same school of thought. Inevitably, a long session on social media ensued in which everyone was reminded of how difficult it was for anyone to feel safe. It was ruled that there was no escape so long as there was a desire to physically eliminate another person, and that the laws were found wanting when it came to killing in the name of faith.

The example of people not prepared to accept mere allegations of blasphemy could have been uplifting had it not been for the manager’s murder in the background. He was apparently well connected socially, and his uncle dismissed the allegations of blasphemy levelled at him by the security guard who had reportedly been pulled up for his laxity while on the job. In the past, clerics have refused to lead funeral prayers for people who have simply provided legal aid to clients who have denied the charges of blasphemy registered against them. In

the Khushab case, the footage shows that a prayer leader stood in front of those who had gathered to offer the funeral prayers and said that the dead man was innocent. Not just that, he discouraged the gathering from indulging in violence on the basis of religious differences. That's one message worth many editions in today's charged atmosphere.

A new beginning

THE American people have made their decision. Joseph R. Biden will be the next president of the United States of America and Kamala Harris will be the first woman vice president. The result was delivered after months of a high political drama that culminated in a chaotic election day and beyond, with Mr Biden slowly gaining the numbers to beat incumbent US President Donald Trump.

The election in America marked a historic turnout with an unprecedented number of votes — a reminder that democracy in the US is an ideal that its citizens hold dear. Ahead of his victory, Mr Biden sought to look beyond the election, and urged calm as President Trump remained in denial about the results and escalated tensions by alleging that polling in some states was “fraudulent”. With words that strove to unite rather than divide the country, the incoming president vowed to put the harsh rhetoric of the campaign behind and “to unite, to heal, to come together as a nation”.

The time leading up to the election saw a polarised country — an indication of just how difficult the job ahead is for Mr Biden. He will be the president of a divided America, where citizens are reeling from myriad issues, including the highest number of Covid-19 infections and deaths in the world, lockdown-induced joblessness, racial inequality, and limited access to affordable healthcare. To add to the challenge, President Trump is making dangerous attempts to cast doubt over the electoral process — allegations which even pro-Republican media outlets say he has little evidence of. Such chaos post-election has never before been witnessed in America, and is likely to incite Trump supporters. As Biden supporters celebrate, there are some cities bracing for riots.

No doubt, the last few years have marked a dark chapter in America's history. But it is encouraging that Mr Biden in his first speech after the vote count began promised that “no one is going to take our democracy away from us”. In a

message after the result was called, he vowed to “be a president for all Americans — whether you voted for me or not”.

While a Biden win is no revolution for America, it is certainly a sign that the days of chaotic, unpredictable and shocking presidential decisions are over. As the world battles the pandemic, grapples with a ‘new normal’ for the economy and contemplates the future of the planet, it is an uplifting thought that one of the most powerful and influential world leaders will be an individual whose decisions are grounded in principles.

Putting America’s house in order is no doubt important, but there are several other issues of global significance that also need immediate attention — the two key being the need for America to return to the Paris accord on environment and for the administration to join hands with European allies on the nuclear deal with Iran.

Covid-19 guidelines

THERE is no doubt any longer: the second wave is intensifying at an alarming pace. Punjab reported 352 new Covid-19 infections in the 24 hours preceding Saturday morning, the fifth straight day with 300-plus cases in the province. Islamabad reported 335 cases. In Sindh, 620 new Covid-19 cases emerged yesterday, 504 in Karachi alone, the highest number since July 29. Given this situation, it was not surprising that the National Command and Operation Centre on Friday issued fresh guidelines according to which indoor marriages are to be banned from Nov 20; not wearing a mask will attract a fine of Rs100; and work from home is allowed for 50pc staff of public and private institutions. The provinces have been asked to implement the new guidelines as per their own modus operandi. Thus Sindh, for instance, has imposed a Rs500 fine on anyone found not wearing a mask. The NCOC has also directed provinces to follow the policy of smart lockdowns in infection hotspots. While these measures overall are sensible and timely, one wonders at the logic of allowing wedding receptions at outdoor venues for a maximum of 1,000 guests which is a number far higher than that found at an average Pakistani wedding.

However, it is clear the authorities are taking the emerging threat very seriously. Unfortunately, the public appears to have become quite lackadaisical about observing SOPs, and many venues are adopting a relaxed approach to social

distancing rules with hardly any masks in sight. For reasons not yet clear, Pakistan has thus far been very fortunate in escaping the kind of havoc that the coronavirus has wreaked in the West, and even next door in India with all the attendant economic pain such a scenario entails. That we have gotten off comparatively lightly may have engendered a certain complacency among the public, in some quarters even bolstered harebrained conspiracy theories about the entire issue being an elaborate hoax. After a somewhat halting and uneven start in February when the coronavirus first arrived in Pakistan, the setting up of the NCOC has led to more coordination between the provinces and the centre over how best to tackle this major challenge. That approach needs to continue for an effective response to what is once again a looming threat. The leadership must ensure consistent messaging through its actions in public to reinforce the importance of social distancing and wearing masks.

Women's education

DISTURBING reports have emerged from Lower Dir regarding the possible reappearance of some extremist elements in the area. According to a report published in the media, a poster pasted outside the main gate of a women's college in Samarbagh threatened students with death if they did not give up their pursuit of higher education. College officials attributed the poster to the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan that opposes women's education, although the group distanced itself from it. However, while it is difficult to confirm the identity of the perpetrators in this case, the incident should cause concern, for it shows that, despite the military operations that defeated the TTP and others of its ilk in KP including former Fata, extremist elements — whether groups or individuals — still lurk in the area, seeking to sow fear among the people and retard progress. Condemning the incident is not enough and those responsible for people's security should be extra vigilant at a time when reports of sporadic attempts to threaten the public are emerging in several areas. Other reports have also emanated from Lower Dir of how radical elements have been putting up posters in mosques and madressahs calling for 'jihad' and the implementation of their interpretation of the Sharia.

The education of girls has been particularly targeted in the past, with hundreds of schools either blown up or closed down by the TTP that strongly opposed women's education and issued frequent warnings to those who dared to defy its

diktat and go to school, Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai being the most well-known victim of its nefarious designs. Years of education have been lost and the authorities should immediately take steps to counter the extremists' influence so that they are prevented from staging a comeback. Clerics in the area should also be taken on board to oppose such regressive instincts. Any attack on women's education is an attack on education as a whole; women are, after all, equal partners and stakeholders in the progress of a nation.

Politicians' words

POLITICAL rhetoric is entering a danger zone. With rallies and jalsas taking place every day, all leaders have ample opportunity to scale up their tempo by going after their opponents. Now the government has also ratcheted up its war of words against the opposition alliance PDM and Prime Minister Imran Khan is himself leading the charge. First in Swat and then in Hafizabad on Saturday, the prime minister addressed political rallies thinly disguised as the launch of schemes. At both venues, the prime minister resorted to incendiary speechmaking and accused the PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif of attempting to incite mutiny in the armed forces. He also said Mr Sharif was trying to bring about a coup. Coming from a prime minister, such words are not only irresponsible, they are also alarming for their possible consequences. The government has adopted an approach that can only create further fissures in an already fractured polity. It is expected of the government to work towards stabilising the system by cooling political temperatures instead of aggravating them further.

Whoever is advising the prime minister to adopt this course of action is doing him and his government no favours. In any case, the prime minister should be the last person to speak about mutiny. After all, during his dharna days it was he who advocated repeatedly that citizens should not pay their utility bills as a mark of civil disobedience. He had also said time and again that overseas Pakistanis should not send their remittances through regular banking channels and should instead use hawala and hundi to transfer money. This amounted to rebelling against the state system and was deemed irresponsible in the extreme. The prime minister should recall his own words before hurling accusations at the opposition today. When Mr Sharif had criticised the establishment as a whole, he was accused of attacking the institution, and when he criticised individuals he is now being accused of fanning mutiny. There is a clear contradiction in this logic.

There would be no need for any such controversy if the establishment kept away from politics and concentrated on its primary job. This is what PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari also referred to in his interview with BBC which has stirred a controversy. In fact, in some ways his position is fairly close to that of Nawaz Sharif. The difference is that he has kept his criticism of the establishment's political role more generalised whereas Mr Sharif has named names. The basic thrust of the argument, however, remains valid. Mr Bhutto-Zardari has in many ways justified Mr Sharif's position by saying that as a thrice-elected prime minister, he knows what he is saying and why he is saying it. However, in today's polarised and charged atmosphere, nuances get lost in the constant noise of shouting. All leaders need to weigh their words carefully.

A bad precedent

THE recent police action against farmers in Lahore following which a protester died was appalling. While the administration hopes that such a measure would act as a deterrent, in reality it could add vigour to the farmers' campaign.

The season of protests is well under way and as usual the law enforcers are being watched closely for evidence of the intent of those in power. How the police and other security personnel deal with demonstrators in urban areas is especially under focus, for big cities and towns are often the places where examples are created. The aim is to deter and discourage or even to crush, and it seems that the government is desperate to quell the farmers' unrest. But in using force against the protesters, it has shown weakness instead of a resolve to address the grievances of the agricultural workers to the mutual satisfaction of both parties.

Not all the known farmer leaders are on the same platform. However, those who are here have been joined by politicians and civil society activists in condemning the use of the baton and water cannons. Also, in the face of vehement police denials, the demonstrators have angrily blamed the security force for the death of a well-known farmer activist from Vehari, demanding a case be registered against the officer who allegedly ordered the charge against the protesters and insisted that chemicals be mixed with the water aimed at the farmers. The police say the deceased died of cardiac arrest a long while after the water and baton

barrage and denied allegations about the use of any chemical as a dispersing agent.

Needless to say, the ammunition on display was quite devastating even if wasn't laced with a lethal substance. It showed intent on the part of the administration to go for the kill rather than wait and engage with, or even try and exhaust, those advancing on the seats of power with their demands. The intensity of the force used in the action was instantly linked to the presence in Lahore of a capital city police officer who has been built up by a section of the press as someone who believed in smothering trouble fast and forcefully. This is a scary precedent for protesters of all hue. It is not a wise tactic and will only deepen divisions between people and the government that must control emotions for its own good.

Intensifying hostilities

ONCE considered a 'frozen' conflict, the stalemate in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia has resumed with ferocious intensity over the past few months, with over 1,000 deaths reported so far. The crisis is centred on the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, though the enclave is ruled by ethnic Armenians, who use the name Artsakh for the region. The area has been witnessing violence since the last days of the Soviet Union — of which both Azerbaijan and Armenia were a part — and the present conflict is in fact a continuation of past hostilities and the 'unfinished business' that accompanied the break-up of the USSR. While the conflict has ethnic dimensions, it also has the potential to draw in regional players and expand beyond Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey has been supporting Azerbaijan, primarily because the latter has a majority Muslim Turkic population, while Russia is believed to harbour a soft spot for Christian Armenia, though officially Moscow is trying to play the role of peacemaker. After all, as the successor state of the USSR, Russia considers Nagorno-Karabakh as part of its 'near abroad', and would not want instability in its backyard. Moreover, Iran is also in a delicate position. It borders the disputed enclave while millions of Iranian citizens are ethnic Azeris, and the Islamic Republic also hosts a small number of ethnic Armenians. Even Israel has stakes in the conflict, with warm ties with Baku.

Several attempts have been made to make all sides respect a ceasefire, but each time such efforts have been shattered by heavy fighting. Perhaps Turkey

and Russia — the primary foreign players in this conflict — must make greater efforts to convince their respective allies to cease hostilities and help resolve this long-standing dispute peacefully. The international community must make greater efforts to help forge a long-lasting peace deal for if the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis is left to fester, it may well spill beyond the enclave and draw regional powers into a destructive new confrontation.

Muslim world & US

AS the page turns on the Trump era, many will be waiting to see how the incoming president Joe Biden will deal with the Muslim world, as well as followers of Islam within America. As it stands, Mr Biden has been saying all the right things, that he wants to be a unifier, that he will undo Mr Trump's 'Muslim ban' — which placed curbs on citizens of several Muslim-majority countries from entering the US — “on day one” of his presidency. This may well be possible domestically, but more complicated will be Mr Biden's attempts to alter Trump-era US policies regarding Muslim states and communities across the world.

Perhaps his most challenging foreign policy issues — at least within the Muslim world — will be the Iran and Arab-Israeli files. Mr Trump had ripped up the painstakingly reached Iran nuclear deal in 2018, invited global opprobrium, and put Washington and Tehran on a collision course with the assassination of senior Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in 2020. Therefore, Mr Biden will have his work cut out for him where re-engaging the Islamic Republic is concerned, primarily because currently very few who matter in Tehran are willing to trust the US.

President Hassan Rouhani greeted the Biden victory with guarded optimism, saying the US now had an opportunity to “compensate for its previous mistakes”. Regarding the Palestine issue, the Trump White House jettisoned all pretence of impartiality by recognising occupied Jerusalem as Israel's capital, as well as recognising Tel Aviv's illegal occupation of Syria's Golan Heights. Mr Biden is also deeply pro-Israel, but has said he wants to open channels with the Palestinians, channels that the Arab side closed after Mr Trump's Jerusalem stunt.

Beyond the Middle East, the world will wait to see if the Biden administration will address the Kashmir issue. To be fair, Mr Trump had offered several times to

mediate the dispute, but such offers did not get off the ground. Mr Biden has said on the campaign trail that he would “raise the issue of Kashmir” with India. The months ahead will show if this promise will be met. And of course Pakistan will also look forward to positive engagement with the president-elect, who should hopefully bring a more balanced approach to South Asia.

The fact is that Mr Biden’s election is a return to the status quo where the American foreign policy establishment is concerned. It should be remembered that Barack Obama had said all the right things during his 2009 speech in Cairo addressed to the Muslim world. However, it was under Mr Obama’s watch that wars involving the US in Syria, Libya and Yemen were launched. Joe Biden will therefore have to demonstrate that the American establishment has learned lessons from these misadventures, and wants to engage the Muslim world with respect for sovereignty and the popular will within these states.

Improving railways

THE upgradation of the Main Line-1 project being executed under the CPEC initiative is crucial for Pakistan’s economy, as recently pointed out by Prime Minister Imran Khan while addressing the launch of a scheme to improve the 127-year-old Hassan Abdal railway station. Mr Khan spoke about the social and economic advantages of the ML-1 project, pointing out that the \$6bn scheme would kick-start massive business activity and generate huge employment opportunities. More important, it is supposed to help industrialise KP and modernise the existing, collapsing railway infrastructure from Karachi to Peshawar and Taxila to Havelian. Once it is complete, it would enhance the railway’s share in the passenger and freight traffic from the present 4pc to 20pc, and offer affordable, safer and faster travel to the middle class. Besides, it will substantially cut the cost of moving cargo up and down the country.

The project’s importance for Pakistan and the future survival of the railway aside, a lot depends on how the Chinese, who are paying 90pc of the cost of the scheme (in the shape of loans), want to proceed and at what pace. As things stand, the Chinese have already slowed down work on almost every CPEC-related scheme because of multiple reasons, the strained relations of Beijing with Washington and the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic being the most important ones. But that is not all. There are indications that the ML-1 project might already

have hit snags. For example, the government was scheduled to publish invitations of international bids almost two months back to ensure that work on the seven-year project could start from next year. It hasn't done so until now because of two reasons. Railway officials privately say the two countries have yet to agree on the proposed cost of the capital to be provided by Chinese banks as Islamabad is asking for a discount. But that is the smaller problem. Apparently, the Chinese are not happy with the 'irresponsible' statements given by some important government officials considered close to the prime minister and allegations of corruption in infrastructure schemes such as the Lahore metro launched under the PML-N government. It is advisable that government officials avoid issuing statements that can cause misunderstandings between the two countries. If they suspect corruption or wrongdoings in any CPEC project, the government should investigate it and punish those responsible for it instead of indulging in unseemly politicking.

Sexist remarks

THE hankering for electoral victory has often seen Pakistani politics plumb new depths — especially when the rival is a woman and a precedent has been set by the party leader, in this case the prime minister, for disparaging her image. Unfortunately, in a society where not many voices are raised in protest against the tendency to make fun of someone based on their gender, slogans about 'change' come across as insincere. Ali Amin Gandapur hails from a party that calls for 'tabdeeli'. He has a responsible job. As a minister, he is Pakistan's choice among the elected ruling party politicians for demonstrating the importance the government attaches to the Kashmiris and the residents of Gilgit-Baltistan. While not someone who is a regular on the media circuit, he nevertheless is on a special mission these days. Eager to secure a win in the Gilgit-Baltistan polls scheduled for Nov 15, he has chosen, regrettably, to resort to despicable, sexist remarks in his bid to convince the electorate of his party's credentials. His verbal assault on PML-N leader Maryam Nawaz — and the subsequent defence of his tasteless words by some others in the corridors of power — is, in fact, a sad reflection on male politicians across the political spectrum. For it is not just the PTI which has displayed such reprehensible behaviour. The PML-N itself, along with others of its ilk, has demonstrated the same tendency to degrade opponents on the basis of gender, a case in point being Khawaja Asif on the floor of parliament no less.

Gilgit-Baltistan would indeed be a big prize for the government if it can secure it in the polls. But does shaming women have to be part of its arsenal as it campaigns against its opponents and recites its usual list of corruption and under-performance by political rivals? Four decades ago, pamphlets from 'anonymous sources' — ie a political party's proxies — rained from the skies to malign a couple of Bhutto women. Clearly, no lessons have been learnt since.

Vaccine expectations

THE world breathed a collective sigh of relief early in the week as drug maker Pfizer announced a significant update regarding its coronavirus vaccine trial. The American multinational pharmaceutical company said early analysis of its Covid-19 vaccine shows more than 90pc efficacy — a development that will give billions of people hope that the end of the pandemic is in sight. The interim analysis of the vaccine is indeed promising, as it looked at the first 94 confirmed cases of Covid-19 among the more than 43,000 volunteers who got either two doses of the vaccine or a placebo and found that less than 10pc of infections were in participants who had been given the vaccine. Yet, even as medical experts are celebrating this vaccine breakthrough, expectations around it must be managed, especially since mass-producing it and rolling it over to the rest of the world will not come without challenges. Who will be inoculated first and how much it will cost are also significant factors, as there are many countries where cases and death tolls are alarmingly high but that are not in a strong economic position that would allow them to procure the drug.

Where Pakistan is concerned, a major problem will be maintaining the cold supply chain and establishing vaccine logistics — something that has marred efforts on the polio vaccination front. Experts have said the Pfizer vaccine will have to be stored at “ultra-cold temperatures” of -70°C until the day it is used — a requirement that is beyond the capacity of everyday refrigerators and one which makes the likelihood of holding the drug in regular clinics a challenge. This task is further complicated by the requirement that the vaccine must be administered in two doses, three weeks apart. As the vaccine manufacturers seek emergency authorisation and FDA approvals, the authorities in Pakistan must consider these challenges and formulate a plan for effective vaccination if and when the time comes.

Meanwhile, the government at the federal and provincial levels must do everything to curb the rising numbers of Covid-19 cases. This week, the NCOC revealed startling figures that suggest that community spread is rampant — increased testing is necessary to get a better idea of the actual extent. The countrywide positivity ratio is at an alarming 4.5pc, with some places such as Hyderabad, Gilgit and Multan recording a positivity ratio of over 15pc. In the last 24 hours (at the time of writing), the virus had claimed 24 lives. As hospitals get full and doctors become overwhelmed, it is critical for the authorities to enforce strict SOPs to prevent a doomsday scenario. Relying on an American or Chinese vaccine is impractical, as it may be months before either becomes available in Pakistan. Instead, the authorities should curb large public gatherings and the flouting of restrictions and irresponsible behaviour by its own members when it comes to prevention mechanisms.

Karachi incident'

UNLIKE most 'midnight knocks' in this country of late, this one has at least had some consequences for the perpetrators. A statement by the ISPR yesterday said the ISI and Rangers officials involved in the "Karachi incident" have been removed pending further departmental proceedings for having acted "overzealously".

It was in the early hours of Oct 19 that Rangers personnel, accompanied by some intelligence officials, had arrived at IG Sindh Mushtaq Mahar's home and compelled him to accompany them to the local sector commander's office.

There, the province's top cop was forced to sign arrest orders for Capt Mohammed Safdar who had been accused in an FIR of having violated the sanctity of the Quaid's mausoleum the previous day. His arrest from the hotel room where he and his wife Maryam Nawaz were staying during their visit to Karachi for the PDM rally in the city hugely embarrassed the Sindh government.

The provincial police too was incensed; at least 13 senior officials applied for leave on the grounds that their high command had been "ridiculed" and the entire force left "demoralised and shocked". What appeared to be snowballing into a full-blown crisis was somewhat defused only when army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa acceded to PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's request to hold an inquiry into the euphemistically termed "Karachi incident". Now it turns out the FIR against

Capt Safdar too was based on false information, adding to the already farcical nature of the episode.

It is in the fitness of things that a probe has been conducted and action initiated against those who trampled so brazenly upon the rule of law. However, this should not be the end of the matter. Junior officers, however zealous, would not act thus on their own initiative without a green signal from higher ups.

That Mr Bhutto-Zardari looked to Gen Bajwa to order an inquiry, and this was undertaken, also indicates that the perpetrators were taking instructions from individuals in the security establishment. Both the ISI and Rangers, whose top cadres comprise serving military officials on deputation, technically report to the prime minister and the interior minister, respectively. However, the near calamitous fallout of this episode indicates the perils of this chain of command being disturbed. The military has unnecessarily been dragged into an ugly political fracas, one that its reputation could well have done without. Security institutions must disengage from civilian affairs; therein lies the path of least controversy.

Pilgrimage politics

THE opening of the Kartarpur Corridor last year, providing visa-free access to a revered gurdwara located on Pakistani soil to Sikh visitors, was designed to help improve relations between Islamabad and New Delhi. Prime Minister Imran Khan had inaugurated it on the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, Sikhism's central figure, as a gesture of goodwill to Sikhs across the world, particularly in India. However, politics and rigidity on the Indian side have ensured that the dream of this 'peace corridor' remains unfulfilled. As the Foreign Office has observed in a statement, India has yet to reopen the corridor from its side. The passage was closed in March this year as a measure to control the Covid-19 outbreak, but even before the pandemic spread far and wide, not many people were using the corridor, ostensibly due to obstacles created by India. Indian Sikhs have also demanded that their government open the passage.

While it is true that people will be hesitant to travel during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the Kartarpur Corridor is concerned it appears that India's concerns are less about health and safety, and more about maintaining a confrontational posture with Pakistan. Once the danger from the pandemic

subsidies, India needs to seriously consider reopening the corridor if it truly wants to give Sikh pilgrims access to the religious site. In fact, as has been stated before in these columns, if both countries allow religious visits for nationals of the other country, this can play a role in reducing levels of mistrust and hatred through people-to-people contact. Along with Kartarpur, there are a host of other Sikh shrines, as well as historical Hindu temples, across Pakistan. On the other hand, a large number of Pakistanis have a desire to visit the famed dargahs in Ajmer, Delhi and other Indian cities to pay their respects to venerated Sufi masters. Once the Covid-19 wave subsides, both states must work on giving easier access to religious visitors from across the border.

Status of CPEC Authority

A NATIONAL Assembly panel rightly postponed the clearance of the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Authority (Amendment) Bill, 2020, for discussion and voting by the lower house till the government satisfies its members on the authority's legal status months after the lapse of the ordinance that created it.

The panel wanted the planning officials to explain the legal basis for the authority to continue to exist and for its chairman to keep his job after the ordinance's expiry in May. The officials couldn't come up with any plausible explanation for the existence of the authority or the expense incurred on running it without any law to protect its operations. Among other things, the bill seeks to indemnify the actions of the authority since the expiry of the ordinance that had been promulgated a year ago and later extended in January.

The officials said that the authority did not have a chairman at the moment. But the panel could not be convinced when informed that the 'incumbent chairman' of the technically defunct authority was just 'coordinating' without drawing any salary or perks since the expiry of the ordinance. Some members demanded that the planning ministry issue a written clarification that there was no chairman of the CPEC Authority, and also explain as to how it was functioning when the ordinance had lapsed, as a precondition for the clearance of the proposed bill by the panel. This is a fair demand for greater transparency in the affairs of the authority.

It is ironic that an agency that was created to inject momentum into CPEC projects and streamline the initiative's policymaking process is caught up in a storm because the government didn't put in the effort required for the timely passage of legislation. That is not all. The government's refusal to address questions regarding the financial probity of the authority head have also led to transparency concerns.

The delay in the passage of the bill required to give legal cover to the authority will not send positive signals to China at a time when the multibillion-dollar CPEC initiative, hit by a sharp slowdown for the last three years, is expected to pick up momentum. With the tenth Joint Cooperation Committee meeting scheduled for later this month, Pakistan and China are expected to take important decisions about infrastructure projects like the ML-1 and hydropower schemes, as well as review progress on the SEZs being developed to facilitate Chinese/local investment in the manufacturing sector in the second phase of CPEC.

It is crucial that the government allays the concerns of the parliamentarians. Moreover, the government must ensure that the authority is staffed by the most qualified people for the job and untainted by financial controversy. Only by addressing such concerns can the authority become effective and expedite work on the CPEC projects.

GB electioneering

ELECTIONEERING in Gilgit-Baltistan is in full swing as the region prepares to go to the polls on Sunday. Nearly all of the country's mainstream parties have hit the campaign trail hard, dispatching their top guns to the area in order to woo voters. The PPP's Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, the PML-N's Maryam Nawaz as well as federal ministers Ali Amin Gandapur and Murad Saeed have all addressed rallies, while the prime minister himself was earlier in the region to boost the chances of forming a PTI government in the northern region. While the Gilgit-Baltistan Chief Court had earlier ordered all 'public office holders' to leave the region for 'violating' the election's code of conduct, this prohibition was overturned by the region's Supreme Appellate Court, allowing the parties to continue their campaigns full throttle. Like in the rest of Pakistan, election rallies have been full of vitriol against opponents, as well as promising the moon to local voters.

Historically, Gilgit-Baltistan has usually voted for the party running the federal government in Islamabad to ensure the region gains maximum benefits. However, it remains to be seen whether this will still be the case, considering the PTI's difficulties in running the federal administration, and the opposition's sustained attempt to bring down the government. But beyond the rhetoric, whichever party comes to power in the region will have to deliver to the people, and respond to their legitimate demands. Gilgit-Baltistan's young, educated electorate is sick of lollipops and wants to see progress on integrating their area with the rest of Pakistan. The PTI has said it will grant provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan. Other parties have made similar promises. Indeed, this option should definitely be considered, without prejudice to the Kashmir dispute. The fact is that the party that takes power in Gilgit-Baltistan must do a lot to bring good governance, jobs, health and education to the region. It must not be ruled by remote control from Islamabad and the elected regional assembly should be empowered to take major decisions. The area must be viewed beyond the lens of geopolitics; residents of the region participate in social, political and economic activities across the country. Therefore, it is their right to have provisional representation in the national legislature, as well as an empowered assembly in their own region which can address the local population's issues. The winner of Sunday's election will have to include these points on its agenda.

Clean sweep

THE national cricket team's clean sweep in the three-match T20 series against Zimbabwe is reassuring although the results were never in doubt considering the vast difference in strength between the two sides. Zimbabwe's game has been in turmoil over the past two decades because of political unrest there and the exodus of key players. It is twelfth in the ICC T20 rankings while Pakistan occupies the fourth spot. But while Zimbabwe did not present much of a challenge to the national team, it was an opportunity for the latter to test young players and to practise ahead of a challenging tour of New Zealand in December. Khushdil Shah, Haider Ali, Usman Qadir, Abdullah Shafique, Haris Rauf and a few others had impressive outings in the T20 series which will contribute to their preparations. Usman was clearly the star of the series. His repertoire of leg-spin bowling kept the Zimbabweans guessing. Having said that, the positives Pakistan can draw from the contests must not make the team complacent. A clean sweep against a lowly ranked side in perfect home conditions is a far cry from what the

players will face in New Zealand. Pakistan's defeats in Australia and England in the past year means they need to work very hard. There is an abundance of young talent in both bowling and batting which is encouraging. However, with fewer international matches being played around the world, these players still have some way to go before they can be described as battle-hardened.

Experts are hoping that the recent change of guard, with Babar Azam replacing Azhar Ali as Test captain, will improve Pakistan's fortunes. Babar, though still learning the ropes as captain of limited-over formats, is a world-class batsman who is expected to lead from the front, a trait sadly lacking in Azhar whose defensive mindset led to Pakistan's overseas losses. The PCB now backs Babar as long-term skipper which could help him raise a competitive unit for the many international and home assignments that lie ahead.

Iranian FM's visit

THOUGH historical, cultural, geographic and religious bonds link Pakistan and Iran, geopolitics has prevented the bilateral relationship from reaching its full potential. This has especially been the case in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the tectonic shifts that have shook the region thereafter.

While Pakistan has tried to strike a balance, its attempts to improve relations with Iran have been hobbled by more hawkish US administrations, as well as some of this country's Arab 'friends'. However, under the PTI's watch there has been a visible attempt to enhance bilateral ties, with high-level visits by civil and military leaders from both sides occurring with some frequency. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's recent trip to Islamabad was the latest in this series of attempts to take ties to the next level.

The Iranian foreign minister's exchanges with Pakistani officials centred on trade and security — two sectors that have dominated the relationship. It was agreed to open a new border point for bilateral trade, while border security issues also came under discussion. Dr Zarif met the prime minister as well as the army chief during his two-day visit.

The Iranian official's visit, even if it was pre-planned, comes at an interesting time where global politics is concerned. In the US, an administration openly hostile to Iran is due to make way for what could be a more accommodating set-up.

Moreover, with Israel's overtures to the Arabs, the situation is quickly changing in the Gulf. Having considered all these developments, Islamabad must chart a relationship with Tehran that is mutually beneficial, and based on the interests of Pakistan first and foremost.

It must be communicated to our foreign friends — specifically in Washington and the Gulf sheikhdoms — that while this country values these relationships, Iran is a neighbour and Pakistan has every right to improve relations with it. This, of course, is easier said than done. But if the Biden administration is sincere about reopening channels with Iran, it should understand Pakistan's position and not create any hurdles in this country's relationship with Iran.

Along with improving trade relations, progress on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline would also help enhance confidence. While the Iranian side has completed its share of work on the project, Pakistan has not been able to honour its commitments, primarily due to the threat of American sanctions. This issue must be included in Pakistan's foreign policy agenda when dialogue opens with the Biden administration.

Moreover, there is the sensitive issue of kidnappings of Iranian security personnel, allegedly by militants operating in the border area. Pakistan's security forces have cooperated to help recover a number of Iranian personnel, and such combined efforts must continue to eliminate the irritants creating mistrust between both countries. Pakistan's policy, as stated by the prime minister, is one seeking regional peace, and with some effort relations with Iran can be improved greatly.

Silent no more

SEXUAL harassment in our educational institutions is an ugly reality that thrives on a culture of silence. On Wednesday, that silence was broken loudly and assertively, that too in a conservative part of the country. Islamia College University in Peshawar was the scene of a large protest demonstration by female students, several from other universities in the city as well, demanding action against faculty members and male students who subjected them to harassment. The students alleged that the varsity administration routinely ignored the complaints of sexual harassment that had been lodged with them. They demanded an empowered committee be set up to investigate these complaints

as mandated under the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010.

Pakistan already has an unacceptably steep dropout rate of girl students beyond the primary level. Inadequate number of educational facilities and ambivalent cultural attitudes towards higher education for girls are among the impediments to gender parity in the sector. Sexual harassment compounds what is already a situation fraught with multiple challenges. Sometimes young women have to withstand family pressure in order to attend college. They are often reluctant to push back against unwelcome advances from faculty or fellow students, fearing that if their families find out, they would compel them to leave their studies. Besides this, demands by teachers for 'favours' in return for grades can add intolerable stress to a young woman's mental well-being. There have been a number of incidents in which sexual harassment and blackmail are suspected to have driven female students to committing suicide. Last year, there was the infamous scandal at the University of Balochistan in which a number of surreptitiously made videos of girl students were used to blackmail them into acquiescing to sexual advances by certain members of the administration. A subsequent investigation by this paper uncovered a pervasive culture of sexual harassment at the institution. A number of other similar scandals have emerged in recent years across the country. The Higher Education Commission must ensure that every institute has functional committees, constituted as per the law, to address complaints of sexual harassment; and that the code of conduct is displayed on the premises. It is heartening that the #MeToo movement is spreading in our educational institutions as well; rallies like that on Wednesday reassure victims that they are not alone. No longer should sexual harassers remain complacent that patriarchal notions of honour will protect them from exposure.

Legislators' assets

POLITICIANS tend to be very careful when it comes to revealing their true wealth — as are many others. The annual statements of assets and liabilities of parliamentarians and their dependents submitted to the Election Commission of Pakistan confirm how economical politicians can be with the declaration of their true net worth. The ritual started by the military regime in 2002 with the ulterior motive of keeping public representatives under its thumb was widely appreciated

as it was expected to make the latter transparent and accountable to the voters. So was the practice by the Federal Board of Revenue to publish the tax details of parliamentarians. Indeed, these documents give a glimpse of their bank accounts and asset portfolios, yet neither of the two actions has produced the desired results — despite the large discrepancies between their declared wealth and actual luxurious lifestyles. It is because our tax laws are lax and allow individuals enough room to hide assets they do not wish to declare or devalue the worth of those they choose to reveal.

At the same time, they can inflate or understate the value of their holdings at whim. Take the statement of assets and liabilities submitted by Prime Minister Imran Khan. According to the details published by the media, Mr Khan, who rode to power on his anti-corruption campaign, is poorer this year compared with last year because he has chosen to declare the 'cost value' of his holdings rather than their present market worth. Same is the case with former premier Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and PTI legislator Khayal Zaman Orakzai. The three gentlemen who were included in parliament's billionaire club until a year ago are no longer part of it because of the 'reduced' value of their holdings. In the absence of a proper mechanism for regular scrutiny of the published assets and liabilities, and tax details of the lawmakers, the entire exercise is meaningless. At best, it will continue to provide cheap fodder for drawing-room gossip.

Mixed signals?

IS the direction shifting, or does the main target remain a security establishment that is loath to distance itself from warring politicians? In the most significant press interview of her political career so far, Ms Maryam Nawaz ruled out dialogue with Prime Minister Imran Khan. Although unwilling to go into the specifics of it, she appeared confident that an exit for Prime Minister Khan was just around the corner. Done with this task, she would not be unwilling to engage with the security establishment and called for a transparent dialogue between the powers that be and her PML-N and the opposition PDM alliance as a whole. The PML-N vice president said that a dialogue was already underway in which the people of this country were participating. There were many 'revealing' moments in the interview to the BBC in which Ms Nawaz referred to 'her army' and trained her guns rather exclusively on the '(s)elected' chief executive of the government. What she is offered was a far more diluted version of the PML-N's narrative vis-

à-vis the defence establishment as opposed to the brash face Mr Sharif has chosen to present, leaving many to wonder whether a door had been left slightly ajar for a compromise of sorts.

But such conjectures were quickly dispelled on Friday, with Mr Sharif in full form. At a rally in Swat, in which he participated through video link, the PML-N leader, while saying he did not hold the entire military responsible for the deeds of some, named names and demanded answers from those elements he held responsible for bringing a 'puppet' prime minister to power. He asserted that he did not want answers from Mr Khan but from those who pulled the strings. Ms Nawaz spoke as well, gunning for the prime minister as she did in her interview to the BBC, as well as the interior minister for his recent controversial remarks about the ANP. Is it part of a plan then? For the father to focus on the establishment and the daughter on the present dispensation and governance under Mr Sharif as compared to that under the current rulers? Is the departure of Prime Minister Khan Ms Nawaz's priority, and the targeting of the establishment Mr Sharif's? Or do these two goals come together seamlessly as the PML-N's narrative? Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, the conflict between the opposition and government is turning uglier by the day, with the government — from a multitude of spokespersons to the prime minister himself — hitting back. With so much anger all around, with allegations and deep mistrust on all sides, with ugly rhetoric, and the refusal to talk to each other, matters will continue to worsen in an atmosphere of deep political uncertainty. Some midway point has to be reached before it's too late.

Economic trends

THE recent macroeconomic trends confirm Prime Minister Imran Khan's words that a broad-based recovery appears to be underway. The evidence of this turnaround can be seen in the recent rebound in manufacturing as indicated by record cement sales, increased demand for cars, motorbikes and white goods, revival of the construction industry, etc. In short, the resurgence of domestic consumption is pushing the current growth momentum. It is a positive sign that the ongoing spurt in consumption is not driven by imports — at least not at the moment. That is why we have seen large-scale manufacturing revive and the current account post a surplus during the first quarter of the financial year. Other

economic indicators such as fiscal deficit and exports — barring food inflation — are also moving in the right direction, according to finance ministry data. The stock market has outperformed other Asian markets and the rupee has strengthened of late. Thus, it can safely be assumed that the country is crawling out of the Covid-induced economic sluggishness that dominated the last quarter of the previous fiscal, even if it is not racing towards growth.

Does this mean that the economy is back on the right track as the prime minister claimed at the launch of the Naya Pakistan Certificates on Thursday? Not really. The resurgence of another ‘economic boom’ doesn’t necessarily mean that the country is once again treading the path of sustainable growth. Challenges remain. For starters, coronavirus infections are again rising, and rapidly, threatening to reverse economic gains. More important, the present economic rebound largely owes to the extensive fiscal stimulus and generous monetary support given by the State Bank to businesses in order to protect them from the adverse impact of the health crisis. Any premature withdrawal of these measures would slow down or delay recovery. More worrying is the fact that the structural issues responsible for dragging down the economy in the past remain unaddressed. For example, little has been done to fix state-owned enterprises and the collapsing energy sector, which have been a major drag on growth. Similarly, tax reforms have been postponed and the issues facing the agriculture sector remain unresolved. With the revival of the IMF programme pushed back further, work on economic and governance reforms will remain suspended for the moment. Only the naïve will expect the current turnaround to last long without implementation of politically tough reforms.

PSL restarts

THE Pakistan Super League juggernaut is set to start rolling once again at Karachi’s National Stadium today, with four teams ready to battle it out for the title, the quest for which was abruptly suspended in March this year due to Covid-19 concerns. There is much excitement as more than 20 foreign cricket stars are featuring in the remaining PSL games alongside Pakistan’s leading players for Lahore Qalandars, Peshawar Zalmi, Multan Sultans and Karachi Kings. Though the matches of this fifth PSL edition will be played behind closed doors and in empty stadiums, the fans will be able to see the contest live on television screens and are anticipating quality cricket over the next few days. Indeed, the cash-rich

PSL, which is the PCB's flagship event, has made great strides since its inception in 2016 and is ranked only behind the Indian Premier League in terms of popularity among the many T20 leagues being staged around the world. The fact that PSL has evolved into a global event after its five seasons is beyond debate. With every season the league has become bigger and better, attracting leading players from hosts Pakistan, West Indies, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, England, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and other nations, besides attracting top sponsors, broadcasters and, most importantly, fans.

It is for this reason that so many foreign players have once again converged on Karachi to play the last four matches to decide the winner. With the New Zealand tour coming up, these games will serve as sound preparation for Pakistan that will be rubbing shoulders with world-class players such as South African captain Faf du Plessis, Carlos Brathwaite and others. Having said that, the rapidly widening gulf between the PSL franchise owners and PCB over the new financial model of the lucrative league is a matter of concern as it could prove detrimental to the future of the extravaganza. The earlier these issues are sorted out, the better it will be for Pakistan cricket.

India's ill intentions

PAKISTAN has taken an important step in its counterterrorism efforts with the launch of a dossier that claims to have substantive evidence of India's active sponsoring of terrorism inside Pakistan. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and DG ISPR Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar unveiled details that included audio conversations between people identified as Indian intelligence agents and terrorists inside Pakistan.

Payments made by Indian agents in bank accounts for terrorist activities on Pakistani soil are also documented. The dossier details the involvement of Indian intelligence agency RAW in specific incidents of terrorism in various regions of Pakistan leading to substantial loss of precious lives. This dossier was unveiled a day after India unleashed yet another unprovoked attack across the Line of Control resulting in the martyrdom of a Pakistani soldier and five civilians including a teenage girl and a toddler. According to Pakistani officials, Indian forces used heavy-calibre weapons to fire indiscriminately on the civilian population in Azad Kashmir.

The international community should be concerned at this swiftly deteriorating situation. However, it should not be surprised. India's belligerence and its muscular policy towards Pakistan has been on the rise since Narendra Modi became the prime minister. For years now, India has been consistently painting Pakistan as the source of instability in the region. Successive governments in New Delhi have accused Pakistan of 'cross-border terrorism' while whitewashing their own policies of brute repression and human rights violations in India-held Kashmir.

For various reasons, India was able to largely convince the international community that its narrative was correct while Pakistan's response suffered from credibility issues. It is the right time now for Pakistan to reverse the narrative and make effective use of diplomacy and strategic communication to find international traction for this dossier. The idea of India as a state sponsor of terrorism may be hard for the international community to digest — fed as it appears to be on a diet of slick Indian propaganda backed by the image that the country has crafted for itself — but this is exactly the challenge that Pakistan must accept.

At the same time, Pakistan should be ready to counter any military misadventure from India. The signs emanating from New Delhi project mal-intent. Bellicose rhetoric and threatening posturing from civil and military leaders across the border have sadly become a norm. Added to this is the pressure on the BJP government after the dismal failure of its attempt to control the situation in occupied Kashmir.

India should, however, know by now that if it attempts to cross any red lines, the response is likely to be swift and hard, as was demonstrated earlier in 2019. For the sake of both countries, indeed the region itself, the international community should make India step back before it is too late.

Child sexual abuse

CHILD abuse is rampant in Pakistan, yet many news items still manage to shock readers to their core due to the sheer violence and brutality of the reported incident. On Friday, a suspect was killed in an 'encounter' by his co-accused, according to police, the day after he was arrested for raping a woman and her five-year-old daughter. Earlier on Wednesday, a four-year-old boy died at the Jinnah Post-Graduate Medical Centre in Karachi after he was found in a semi-

conscious state the day before; there were signs of torture and possible sexual assault inflicted on him. Last month, the body of an eight-year-old boy in Balochistan's Kalat district was found by relatives and police showing signs of rape by multiple people. The same month, another eight-year-old was found hanging from a tree in Killa Abdullah district; he had been raped and strangled to death. The month before that, the body of an eight-year-old raped and murdered boy was found in Karachi's Federal B Area, in the shadow of another horrific rape and murder of a five-year-old girl in Old Sabzi Mandi, sparking protests across the country.

While many express shock at what appears to be an increase in the number of such heinous crimes, it is likely that people are only now beginning to report in greater frequency things that remained hidden and unspoken for many years, cloaked in shame and secrecy. This is likely just the tip of the iceberg. Children lack agency, and they are rarely taken seriously or heard in our society, which makes them easy targets for abuse by the monsters that move freely in our midst. Violence against children is common, and to this day, there is a lack of consensus on who is categorised as a child in Pakistan, despite its being signatory to various international charters on the rights of children. Even in Sindh, which raised the minimum age of marriage to 18 years and made underage marriages a punishable offence, there are instances of the law being ignored. In the most recent case, the Sindh High Court ordered police to arrest all suspects who oversaw the wedding of a 14-year-old girl to a 44-year-old man in Karachi, including the cleric. In a video that is being circulated on social media, another popular cleric can be seen justifying the marriage of minor girls, using religion as a pretext. What minds are these?

Moral policing

THERE appears to be no end to the government's relentless efforts to curb freedom of expression in the sphere of arts and culture. After obsessively hounding TikTok and other popular apps for alleged 'vulgar' content, the government has found a new avenue through which it can block audience access to content it finds disagreeable. The Cabinet Division informed the State Bank of Pakistan recently to ensure that local banks block online payments for digital content from India immediately, with specific mention of the network which hosts the web series Churails. This request to ban access to Churails comes weeks

after Pemra objected to its “bold subject matter” and asked the network to block its show for viewers in Pakistan. The Zee5 network complied with the request but it was not enough for the censor-happy moral police who, though initially reversing the ban, have now gone on to block payments to the network. Members of the film and television fraternity believe the State Bank order was made specifically to target Churails, as Indian content has long been banned on television channels.

The move to restrict this show speaks volumes for the mindset of those making decisions about what content is acceptable. As our channels continue to produce TV series with regressive storylines that depict women as lesser beings, Churails is facing a backlash for daring to push the envelope and imagine a society where women are the arbiters of justice. The fact that Churails, a truly made-in-Pakistan production that has earned critical acclaim, is now banned at every level by our authorities paints a sorry picture of the perverse lens through which regulators view content. It also sets a dangerous trend which will embolden those wielding the censorship whip to use their discretionary powers to ban more content they find unpalatable. The government must rethink its backward approach when it comes to women’s and digital rights. Banning and policing content in this day and age sends a negative message to the world about Pakistan’s democratic values.

Covid resurgence

THE worst fears about the second wave of Covid-19 in the country appear to be coming true as daily deaths, hospitalisations and positive cases rise at alarming rates. On a single day, Nov 14, 39,410 people were tested for the virus. Confirmed new cases on the same day were reported to be 2,443 — an indication that the national positivity ratio is a staggering 6pc.

The number of those succumbing to coronavirus-related complications, too, is rising. In recent days, a Peshawar High Court judge, an MPA and a journalist were among the over 180 recorded virus deaths across cities. All these indicators show that the Covid-19 curve in Pakistan is moving upwards despite the period of respite post-August when the curve was flattened through lockdown measures.

Read: Is Pfizer’s vaccine the answer to Pakistan’s Covid-19 problem?

Yet, even as we appear to be moving rapidly towards a dreadful stage of the pandemic, public activity — including superspreader events like political rallies and huge weddings — are in full swing. Out in public spaces, mask-wearing and distancing is still a rarity.

This casual attitude points to a tremendous failure of leadership. In a crisis that demands responsible behaviour, our government is flouting its own advice of limiting gatherings and is staging rallies to counter an equally careless opposition. During the first wave, rising cases and a fear of the unknown forced authorities to take action. The measures taken at the time included strong public messaging, strict enforcement of SOPs and a national conversation around the prevention of Covid-19.

Today, however, even as infection rates rival the stark figures of July, that vigour and direction are missing. Aside from the NCOC's warnings, Covid-19 is largely absent from the government's messaging and, as a result, fails to register as a threat with members of the public. Hence, SOPs are being flouted, mass events, often indoors, are taking place unabated and the appetite for prevention is low. It appears the government is currently playing a reactive rather than a proactive role — a strategy which has come at a high human and economic cost in other countries.

The government must get its house in order. The myth of the miracle immunity that the authorities had banked on after the first wave is fast evaporating as the data paints a bleak picture. Still, the loss of life and the economic setbacks can be limited if the government acts fast and tackles the pandemic as a priority. This can be done with a strong awareness campaign, ramped-up testing and strict restrictions on gatherings of more than a handful of people.

Mask wearing should be non-negotiable in workplaces and schools, as the rampant spread in these spaces may force an unwelcome closure at a later stage. With a renewed vigour led by data and science, the government should be able to lower the curve. Anything less is unacceptable.

Invasion of privacy

UNLAWFUL surveillance and invasion of privacy corrode the very foundations of a democratic social order based on universal principles of human rights. No

information obtained through these methods is worth that price. Justice Mansoor Ali Shah in his dissenting note in the Justice Qazi Faez Isa case makes clear his disquiet over the means used by the Asset Recovery Unit with the help of the intelligence agencies to obtain information about the petitioner judge and his family. "In our constitutional democracy, it is essential that everyone enjoys his or her domain of freedom, free from government intrusion — lest it aim to check an unlawful activity," writes the judge in the 65-page document. Indeed, he says, so critical is the issue that "in it lays the destiny of our people and the future course of our country".

Institutional imbalances have contributed to such a polarised and cut-throat environment in this country that the constitutionally protected rights to personal liberty, privacy and dignity have fallen by the wayside. Many a forward bloc is said to have been created and political rupture engineered through the judicious use of incriminating personal information obtained on the sly. Instances abound of unlawfully accessed information being deployed to gain an upper hand over perceived adversaries, including judges, politicians, bureaucrats and journalists. One reason cited for the dismissal of Ms Bhutto's second government in 1996 was illegal wiretapping of judges' phones. In its verdict upholding that dismissal, the Supreme Court held that phone tapping and eavesdropping by government authorities was immoral, illegal and unconstitutional. In 2007, during Gen Pervez Musharraf's government, surveillance photos of then chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's residence and transcripts of evidently bugged conversations were presented in the Supreme Court, which then ordered a sweep of judges' homes and courtrooms for spying devices. Nevertheless, the invasion of privacy continued as before. In June 2015, ISI personnel disclosed to the Supreme Court that the agency had tapped close to 7,000 telephones across the country during the previous month. Recently, PML-N vice president Maryam Nawaz claimed in an interview that during her incarceration, the authorities had placed cameras inside her jail cell and bathroom. If there is any truth to these allegations, then those who carry out such despicable acts and continue to do so despite repeated admonishments by the court have plumbed the depths of indecency. This grotesque disregard for human dignity must end here and now.

Ethiopia conflict

VIOLENCE has flared in Ethiopia over the last several days, as an internal conflict has pitted the country's Tigray state against the federal government in Addis Ababa. While the party that controls Tigray says it has fired rockets into a neighbouring state, Amnesty International has observed that a massacre involving "scores, and likely hundreds, of people" has occurred in the town of Mai-Kadra. The violence risks destabilising Ethiopia internally, and also has the potential to spread to the rest of East Africa; opponents of the government say they may target neighbouring Eritrea, while Sudan has been receiving refugees from the conflict. Defusing the internal crisis will be a major test for Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who won 2019's Nobel Peace Prize for his peace agreement with Eritrea. However, in this case, Mr Ahmed seems to be talking tough, ordering military action against the TPLF party that runs Tigray, in an apparent effort to stop other states and regions from offering open resistance to the centre.

While the Ethiopian authorities have insisted this is an internal matter, they should not refuse the good offices of the UN or the African Union that can be used to defuse the crisis. After all, stability has come to the country after much turmoil. The 1980s were a turbulent time, especially under the Marxist Derg regime, which saw civil war as well as conflict with Eritrea and a devastating famine. To ensure that this painful history does not repeat itself, the Ethiopian prime minister must take the lead and invite his opponents to the negotiating table instead of looking for a victory on the battlefield. In a multiethnic and multireligious state like Ethiopia, the use of force may bring temporary respite, but tensions bubbling underneath may well explode in due course. Also, Ethiopia's internal stability is important for the entire Horn of Africa, as in neighbouring Somalia, the world has witnessed how horribly things can go wrong should conflict — aided by the collapse of the state — continue unabated.

After GB polls

THE Gilgit-Baltistan elections have delivered little surprise. Despite the spirited campaign by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maryam Nawaz, the GB electorate has chosen to vote as per convention for the party ruling in Islamabad. The final

results show the independent candidates also winning in large numbers. Many of them are expected to join hands with the PTI helping it form the government in GB.

The PPP has also done fairly well while the PML-N has trailed the others, with one key reason being the exodus of some important electable candidates from its ranks prior to the elections. These elections saw unprecedented levels of campaigning as well as wide media coverage because they took place in the backdrop of a larger political confrontation between the PTI and the opposition alliance PDM. The reactions to the results therefore are as unsurprising as the results themselves. The PTI says the poll outcome has buried the opposition's narrative; the PPP and PML-N say the results are a product of electoral rigging.

Neither may hold fully. The opposition may cry foul at alleged electoral malpractices but unless it can come up with some solid evidence, its accusations will stay confined to political jalsas and TV talk shows. Similarly, the PTI will gloat that the opposition's campaign will be deflated because of its loss in GB, but this claim too will echo into ultimate oblivion across the mountains and valleys of Gilgit, Skardu and Nagar. In the plains of Punjab, KP and Sindh, the PDM's campaign against the government is not likely to suffer any adverse impact.

In fact, it may get buoyed by the fresh ammunition of rigging which the PDM will use to weaponise its rhetoric for the upcoming rallies. After a three-week break for the GB elections, the PDM kicks off its campaign in Peshawar next week followed by jalsas in Multan, Lahore and Larkana. These high-octane events will further raise the political temperature and vitiate the already toxic environment. If GB elections were expected to release some pressure, this is not likely to happen. There is cause for worry. The PPP was seen as being more flexible in its approach towards the establishment compared to the rigid stance of the PML-N but the GB elections have provided the PPP leadership a reason to clench its fists. Mr Bhutto-Zardari has already declared that the elections have been stolen.

Given this tense situation, and the intensifying war of words over the next few weeks, it would be advisable for saner elements on all sides to take a step back. They may want to lower the temperature through better cooperation and coordination in parliament. Some form of dialogue needs to happen and parliament is the most relevant forum for it. The government should take the initiative in this regard without further delay.

PM in Balochistan

BECAUSE Balochistan is seen as relatively 'far' from the national political mainstream in this country, whenever high officials visit the province expectations are high. During Prime Minister Imran Khan's trip to Balochistan last week, a number of promises were made to the people of Pakistan's geographically largest but also its most underdeveloped province. Mr Khan rightly pointed out that to ensure a strong country, all federating units must taste the fruits of development. Unfortunately, despite its mineral wealth Balochistan has failed to see accompanying development over the decades, which has played a large part in fuelling alienation. Speaking in Kech district, Mr Khan reiterated that under the CPEC umbrella, the "government is giving all attention to speedy development of" Balochistan, while urging the province's youth to focus on their education. Mr Khan also laid the foundations for a number of infrastructure and social projects in the province during his visit.

There has for long been talk of bringing Balochistan into the political mainstream, and several elected governments have launched well-meaning steps to improve basic indicators in the province. However, there seems to be no holistic plan to address Balochistan's problems. What is more, the fact that the province has often been viewed purely through the security lens has also prevented improvement in the socioeconomic situation. Take health and education; according to one figure, around 60 to 70pc of Balochistan's children are out of school (the figure touches 78pc for girls) while in the health sector, the province has the country's highest maternal mortality rate. If Balochistan is to reap the benefits of CPEC or other infrastructure projects, then it needs to have an educated and healthy population. Mr Khan's focus on education is well-placed; now this vision must translate into accessible schools in all of Balochistan's districts where its children can get a decent education. Some have attributed Balochistan's backwardness to the sardars that operate in many parts of it. While this contention cannot be ruled out, it is the state that bears primary responsibility for lack of development in this federating unit. In fact, the state's use of Balochistan's resources and its lack of attention to socioeconomic development are among the factors that have fuelled separatist militancy in the province. This alienation can be reversed when the people of Balochistan see that both the centre and the provincial government are doing everything possible to bring prosperity to this neglected corner of Pakistan.

All hazy on smog

MOTHER Nature came to the rescue of people gasping for breath on Sunday when Lahore and many other parts of Punjab received their first spell of winter rain. The relief was anxiously awaited ever since a thick and deeply demoralising sheet of smog covered a wide area around the provincial capital. The rain drastically improved the air quality. For instance, in the Quaid-i-Azam Industrial Estate, the Air Quality Index was dramatically down to around 160. Only a day or two earlier, it had shot up to well over 400. Although these are the readings for an industrial area, an AQI level of 401-500 is considered very poor. But for the rain, the index was advancing fast towards the high danger limit of AQI 500. There are many who doubt these numbers as having been downplayed. The sheer inevitability of running into smog more severe than last year's is playing on their minds and as patience runs out, there are more and more voices holding the authorities responsible for inaction.

In this age, it has taken a 'privileged' city and region many seasons to realise that it is not the kiln that is the main source of pollution, ie smog. It is not the mill that irks clean-environment activists, even though like the brick-makers, electricity generators using furnace oil and stubble-burning farmers who were the original suspects, the factory owners too are contributing their share to particles that remain suspended longer in the winter air. In fact, it is transport that is largely responsible for the smog. The government is finally realising this. Thus as it closes down a large number of kilns for a few weeks and on a busy day books more than 100 factories for emitting smoke, it is also seizing a number of vehicles all over Punjab for making the air so unbreathable. But the circumstances demand steps that are permanent, and not seasonal. Efforts must be made to shift to cleaner sources of energy.

Yet more space

MANY a reactionary outfit has been allowed to thrive on Pakistani soil. Each one of them has ill served the global image of this county. Indeed, their incendiary rhetoric and violent actions have reinforced the enemy's narrative and weakened our principled positions on regional human rights issues. And in its efforts to 'manage' the violence these ultra right-wing outfits wreak, the government cedes

more and more space to them — a vicious cycle that appears to have no end in sight.

The latest instance of this myopic approach was played out at the Faizabad interchange between Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The site was occupied by a large number of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan activists protesting against the blasphemous caricatures by the French magazine Charlie Hebdo. Despite clashes with the police, they refused to end their sit-in until the government met their demands.

These included: boycotting French products, expelling the French ambassador, not appointing an ambassador to France and releasing all arrested TLP activists. On Monday night, the TLP announced that the government had agreed to its demands. While no official confirmation has yet been forthcoming, the interior ministry apparently ordered the immediate release of the detained activists. Once again it seems the ultra-right has browbeaten the Pakistani state into capitulation.

The sense of déjà-vu is unmistakable, and not only because such craven surrender has been par for the course for some time in this country. It was in November 2017 at the Faizabad interchange, during the PML-N government's tenure, that the TLP first made its presence felt when its activists forcibly occupied the site for over 20 days to demand the ouster of the law minister on entirely specious grounds.

A police operation went awry, forcing the resignation of the minister and a humiliating climbdown by the government. The end came with a questionable army-brokered agreement — and cash being distributed among the protesters by a senior military official. In the elections that followed next year, the TLP — until recently a little-known outfit whose raison d'être had been the lionisation of former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer's murderer — played spoiler and dented the PML-N vote bank in several constituencies. It has since demonstrated its destructive street power on several other occasions, most notably on the announcement of Asiya Bibi's acquittal by the Supreme Court.

The group tasted blood when it first clashed with the authorities in 2017, and like other such entities, it will continue to use its bully pulpit to pressure governments into wholly untenable compromises that an economically weak country cannot afford. Blocking coverage of the protests on television or suspending mobile phone services, as the PTI government has done this time, are redundant and

short-term tactics. Matters have come to a point where it is imperative to stop mollycoddling groups of TLP's ilk, let alone using them for dubious political objectives. They can only lead Pakistan to ruin.

PM's Covid concerns

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan in his address to the nation on Monday made some significant remarks about the growing number of Covid-19 cases in the country. Mr Khan announced restrictions on all public gatherings, which effectively limits political rallies by his own party as well as those of the opposition. This is a welcome decision. Covid-19 cases are spreading at an alarming rate, with the national positivity rate inching towards 7pc — a frightening statistic which in several other countries has triggered strict lockdowns. There is no doubt that the limiting of public gatherings will prevent the spread of the virus. However, given the PTI's acrimonious relationship with the opposition parties, and the generally toxic political environment, Mr Khan's decision in this regard may be seen by opponents as a stealth attack on their democratic right to assembly. The government and the opposition have been at loggerheads from day one, and on many occasions their rivalry has gone far beyond the level of political competition considered necessary for a democratic system to function robustly. Both sides, including Mr Khan himself, have indulged in petty politics and resorted to deeply personal, misogynistic and unsavoury attacks on their opponents. In such an environment, the decision to restrict political gatherings may come across as a ruse. Nevertheless, it must be considered seriously by opposition parties given the threat the virus poses to members of the public, and Mr Khan or one of his aides should engage with their opponents directly to allay suspicions. In fact, Mr Khan's decision to allow outdoor wedding ceremonies of up to 300 must be challenged, as it creates a false sense of security that these gatherings are somehow safe, even when science indicates otherwise.

It is a pity that the government and its opponents have been unable to work together on any important issue. Yet, the formation of the NCOC and the effective coordination between members of the federal government and provincial ministers is a small silver lining in this cloud of gloom. It is this spirit of rising above the situation and tackling a national challenge that is required during a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The prime minister must seriously reflect on the value of such coordination and rethink his government's combative

approach; he himself has noted that Pakistan may be hurtling towards a point where the pandemic could hit harder than it did during the first peak in June.

FDI challenge

DESPITE a 10-month-high foreign direct investment of \$317.4m in the previous month, net FDI flows into the country shrank by 14.5pc to \$587.5m in the first four months of the ongoing fiscal from a year ago. That is not all. A major chunk of the direct investment flows made its way from China to coal and other power projects being constructed as part of the CPEC initiative following the resumption of work on schemes during the period when a decline in Covid-19 infections was being witnessed. Besides CPEC projects, telecommunication, financial services and oil and gas were the other major recipients of FDI during these months, according to recent data published by the State Bank of Pakistan.

Owing to a number of reasons, Pakistan has never been a favoured destination of foreign investors. Barring the record-high FDI flows of \$5.6bn and \$5.4bn in 2007 and 2008, foreign investment has remained less than 1pc of the size of the economy although other economies comparable to Pakistan have attracted FDI close to 3pc of their GDP. It must be noted that the FDI flows into the country in recent years have originated mostly from China in transport, power and other infrastructure projects undertaken under the CPEC initiative. Chinese investment also has slowed down significantly since the completion of the 'early harvest' schemes related to CPEC. Chances of FDI flowing into new non-CPEC projects in the near to medium term appear to be very slim at the moment. The resumption of work on power projects, dams and railway infrastructure under CPEC may increase Chinese flows modestly though. Facing a chronic balance-of-payments problem with negative Net International Reserves, Pakistan needs to urgently woo non-debt-creating foreign investment, especially in export-oriented industries, to increase its overseas shipments and replace foreign debt to pay its import bill. With global FDI flows plummeting in the wake of the Covid-19 health crisis, the government must invest heavily in modern industrial and agricultural infrastructure for that to happen.

New PSL champions

THE Karachi Kings have emerged as the new Pakistan Super League heroes in the highly anticipated yet lopsided final at Karachi's National Stadium on Tuesday. The Lahore Qalandars, though on a roll this fifth PSL season, could not sustain their act and went down by five wickets after posting just 134 on the board. A Karachi-Lahore PSL final was touted as the 'battle of the Titans'. However, the prolific Babar Azam, currently ranked among the world's top three batsmen, helped the Kings romp home to victory with a brilliant 63 off just 49 balls. His sublime form in the League matches this year earned him the Player of the Final and Player of the Series awards. PSL V showed a clear change in trend this year as no past title holder including the Quetta Gladiators, Peshawar Zalmi and Islamabad United could make it to the final. The Lahore Qalandars, after their last spot in all previous PSL editions, had become synonymous with defeat. However, they turned things around this season under the lesser-known captain Sohail Akhtar to reach the final.

Earlier this year, PSL matches were suspended. The remaining games began after a gap of almost eight months. However, the excitement of fans remained intact while prominent media coverage ensured a huge viewership across the country. The appearance of 21 foreign players in the four remaining games was the icing on the cake. Thankfully, the PSL has now begun to produce promising batting stars — apart from fast bowlers — which is a boost to the national team. For the past many decades, batting has been the Achilles heel of Pakistan cricket, and experts including former cricketers believe that T20 leagues have only spoiled the techniques of batsmen due to the breakneck pace of scoring required. However, the emergence of fine batsmen like Haider Ali, Khushdil Shah, Zeeshan Ashraf and a few others have strengthened the batting department, besides providing an expanded pool of players to select from for Pakistan's challenging assignments ahead.

A law unto themselves

THE law of the jungle is alive and well in Pakistan's lower courts. Additional District and Sessions Judge Dr Sajida Ahmed Chaudhry has penned a no-holds-barred letter to Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed and the Lahore High

Court chief justice dilating on the harassment that her fellow judges face at the hands of rowdy and boorish lawyers. “I am very much disappointed and discontented after spending about 21 years of judicial service, the golden period of my youth,” she writes. “Respect, prestige and sacredness of this prestigious and dignified profession [are] of no worth.” In fact, the judge says that had she known she would have to contend with so much abuse and disrespect from lawyers in her courtroom, she would not have entered the profession at all. Dr Chaudhry has put her name to what is a widespread sentiment among her compatriots. In May 2018, some judges from Lahore’s district courts had addressed an anonymous complaint along similar lines to the LHC chief justice, requesting that he visit the civil courts to see for himself the dire conditions in which they had to work.

One would imagine that those whose very profession is based upon the rule of law, who spend hours arguing over its finer points, would have internalised a respect for the law, at least in its fundamental aspects. Dispiritingly, this is far from the truth. There have been umpteenth incidents in the past few years where the black coats have indulged in hooliganism, even roughing up judges whose verdicts they disagree with. Who can forget the shocking scenes last year of lawyers on a rampage in Lahore attacking the Punjab Institute of Cardiology to avenge the ‘humiliating treatment’ meted out to some of their colleagues by certain PIC doctors? Or when dozens of lawyers in December 2017 vandalised the newly constructed judicial complex in Multan to protest against shifting to the building? These are but two instances of a long and inglorious chronology where the black coats have used their fists to ‘settle scores’ or make their displeasure known. Then there are the strikes that prolong the travails of litigants and their families. Justice Mansoor Ali Shah earlier said that 948 strikes in district bars between January and March 2017 prevented 600,000 cases from being taken up.

There is also a gender dimension to the workplace harassment issue. The male-female ratio in the legal profession is heavily skewed in favour of men: if aggression in the courtroom is not firmly dealt with by the bar associations and the senior judiciary, it could further discourage women from entering the profession. Finally, one must ask why so many lawyers have developed a tendency to go off the rails at the drop of a hat. Surely they must cultivate more faith in the basics of a well-ordered society.

IMF programme

IS Pakistan close to salvaging its \$6bn deal with the IMF, which remains suspended for the last eight months? The prime minister's finance adviser, Hafeez Shaikh, thinks it is, as he revealed that an IMF mission will visit Pakistan in a few weeks to "give a formal structure" to the ongoing discussion on how to revive the stalled programme, and repeated that "good news about the country's economy was pouring in from all four corners". The discussions between Islamabad and the mission will primarily focus on plans to improve the tax system and collection, as well as the power sector, according to the adviser. If talks are successful, as is being hoped by the government, the programme will be revived, paving the way for the release of the third loan tranche of over \$500m. So far the multilateral lender has disbursed \$1.5bn under the facility.

While the details of the ongoing discussions between Islamabad and the global lender of last resort haven't emerged, we know that the programme was stalled after the government wanted the Fund to not pressure it for raising power tariffs till June for full-cost recovery from consumers as agreed to in the deal signed in July last year. In response, the Fund had delayed the approval of the second half-yearly programme review, withholding the third tranche. A month later, the Covid-19 pandemic had fundamentally changed economic realities, both domestically and globally. Since then, Pakistan has digressed from the fiscal, monetary and structural reforms framework agreed upon with the IMF to counter the adverse impact of the global plague on the economy and people. Fiscal and monetary measures implemented by the government and the central bank have since helped mitigate the virus's economic impact. Generous financial assistance from the IMF as well as other multilateral lenders also complemented efforts to shield the economy from the outbreak's adverse impact. Indeed, the government is in a difficult situation, despite signs of recovery. The turnaround remains fragile in the absence of deep structural reforms that has been dragging down the economy every few years. Simultaneously, the implementation of reforms and the possible reversal of fiscal, monetary and regulatory incentives for businesses in case of resumption of the IMF programme will ruin the bullish market sentiment and upend the recent gains the economy has made. Thus, Islamabad and the IMF need to find a middle way to advance reforms without hurting the revival of growth prospects.

Electoral reform

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has announced that his government intends to pursue electoral reforms in order to ensure that in future elections are not disputed and winners and losers both accept the result. In this respect, he has said he plans to introduce electronic voting for citizens including those residing overseas.

In addition, he has voiced a strong preference to have Senate elections by show of hands instead of the secret ballot that is currently the method. The prime minister correctly diagnosed that secret balloting is facilitating corruption and vote-buying, and he reminded the people that his party had expelled parliamentarians from its ranks who had been identified as having sold their vote. However, the prime minister hoped that the opposition would cooperate with the government in legislating these reforms as the government did not have the required parliamentary numbers to push them through.

But the opposition has rejected these government proposals and has said it would bring its own set of proposals for a comprehensive reform of the electoral process. Opposition leaders explained that while they will not engage with the government as a matter of principle, they will continue to proceed with their parliamentary duties as well as their work in the committees.

It is good that both sides acknowledge the need for electoral reform. But it is a sad commentary on the state of affairs that the bedrock of the democratic system — elections — remains disputed. Today, we have plunged to depths where it is near-impossible to visualise political opponents accepting any form of electoral results. This bodes ill for the system as the Azad Kashmir elections are due shortly. In time, the country also has to conduct local body polls.

The general elections are less than three years away. Reform takes time. The parties have wasted years in arguing about reform and blaming each other for sabotaging them instead of sitting down together and hammering out the requisite legislation. Things have come to such a pass that the prevailing polarisation makes it very difficult to debate and carry out poll reform.

This is unfortunate. The government and the opposition may talk about their own set of proposals but these will not amount to much unless there is a broad

consensus between both sides. In the absence of such consensus, and the urgency to make it happen, statements like the ones given by the prime minister and opposition leaders are more political and less substantive.

This is why it is critical that senior people in parliament engage in some quiet discussion to forge a basic minimum agreement on electoral reforms. Some reform is better than none. It is the responsibility of the political leadership to establish the electoral rules of the game before we head towards a fresh round of electioneering. The politicians owe this to themselves, and to the nation.

State Bank projection

BASED on recent improvements in macroeconomic fundamentals, the State Bank has revised upward its estimate for economic growth during the present fiscal year to up to 2.5pc — as opposed to the 0.4pc contraction seen last year. The new growth projection is slightly better than the government's target of 2.1pc and the bank's own earlier expectation of a maximum increase of 2pc in GDP. The growth estimate is based on expectations of a steady performance in agriculture, an upturn in the services sector and a modest increase in industrial output. When compared to the bank's buoyant readings of recent domestic economic developments in its State of Pakistan's Economy report for 2019-20, the IMF projects GDP to expand by 1pc and the World Bank by 0.5pc. The World Bank also forecast that economic growth in Pakistan would remain subdued during the next two years. It's not the first time that the State Bank is 'bullish' on the economy's growth prospects. The bank kept projecting growth of up to 3.5pc last fiscal year in spite of a significant decline in business confidence, high interest rate, price inflation, poor farm output and industrial contraction as domestic demand shrank because of IMF-mandated stabilisation policies. It downgraded its growth estimate and almost halved its policy rate only when it became clear that Covid-19, already tossing around the major economies, was going to fast topple this country's economy as well.

Indeed, the change in the bank's stance during the virus outbreak coupled with the reversal of harsh stabilisation policies and the fiscal stimulus for businesses has somewhat improved macroeconomic fundamentals and business confidence. Yet it is too early to say if the current recovery is going to be sustainable, even in the short term. As the bank acknowledges in the report, its

growth projections are “subject to risks, including from the evolution of Covid-19, extreme weather conditions, external demand, and progress on the reform front”. In particular, the bank says, the earlier estimates for Kharif crops (especially cotton) don’t appear promising, given the weaknesses in farmers’ financial conditions and heavy rains causing losses to standing crops. Besides, a lot depends on Islamabad’s negotiations with the IMF for resumption of the suspended \$6bn EFF programme. A reversal of post-Covid-19 policies could hurt business confidence and short-term growth prospects. At the same time, the government will have to bring its focus back on governance reforms and strengthen agriculture and industry for sustainable growth.

Witness protection

AMONGST the numerous factors hobbling the criminal justice system in Pakistan is the fact that due to inefficient witness protection programmes, eyewitnesses are afraid to testify, or end up retracting their testimony. As pointed out recently in this paper, three witnesses retracted their statements in the high-profile case of Naqeebullah Mehsud, an aspiring model who was gunned down in a staged encounter on the outskirts of Karachi allegedly by policemen. According to the counsel of Naqeebullah’s family, the witnesses backed out because they were afraid to testify against ‘influential’ suspects, which include former policeman Rao Anwar. This is not the first incident of its kind, as ATC judges have said on record that members of the public are ‘too frightened’ to assist the state in prosecuting terrorists and violent criminals. This is understandable, for unless witnesses are promised foolproof protection for themselves and their families, not many will risk their lives to testify against dangerous suspects. While a witness protection law has been passed in Sindh, its full implementation remains lacking, which explains people’s reluctance to take the witness stand without fear.

However, should the state so desire, it can put in place an effective witness protection programme that can help bring violent perpetrators to justice. For example, the paramilitary Rangers ensure protection to witnesses in cases which they prosecute, and observers say this was one of the key reasons for the successful prosecution in the Baldia factory fire incident in Karachi. Indeed, the state must ensure that such programmes — which protect the identity of vulnerable witnesses and help relocate them if necessary — are put in place for better prosecution of cases of terrorism and violent crime. If the state leaves

witnesses to fend for themselves, no one will be willing to risk their life to testify against violent actors and powerful, well-connected suspects. Pakistan's criminal justice system leaves a lot to be desired. Along with better investigation, a credible witness protection programme can help improve matters.

PM in Kabul

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan's daylong visit to Kabul on Thursday has come at a time when a question mark hangs over the Afghan peace process, and when the US is in the middle of a presidential transition. The latter development has to be considered because it remains to be seen how a Biden White House handles the Afghanistan file, specifically the key question of foreign troops' exit from the country.

The fact is that the Pak-Afghan bilateral relationship has for the past several decades been viewed through the lens of the Afghan internal conflict, therefore any improvement in ties is linked to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Mr Khan's meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani remained cordial, and both leaders reiterated their commitment to peace as well as strengthening the bilateral relationship. Mr Khan offered this country's full support when he told the Afghan side that if "Pakistan can help, please let us know".

Engagement at the highest level between Islamabad and Kabul is essential for improved bilateral relations, as well as peace in the region. Too often spoilers have tried to drive a wedge between both capitals, which has prevented the relationship from developing to its full potential. Moreover, there are elements within the Kabul establishment that have no love lost for Pakistan, and are constantly blaming this country for Afghanistan's internal woes.

While it is true that Pakistan has some leverage with the Afghan Taliban, blaming this country alone for Afghanistan's problems is unwarranted. That country has been ruined by decades of involvement in its internal affairs by external forces, including the superpowers of the day, as well as failure of the Afghan political and tribal elites to accept each other. However, if the relationship is to move forward, both Islamabad and Kabul must build trust; regular exchanges between the respective leaderships can help reduce the trust deficit and address areas of concern.

Coming to the Afghan peace process, Donald Trump, in his final few months in the White House, has announced a fresh drawdown of US troops. While the move has been criticised by some in the American establishment, as well as Nato, the world will have to wait till Joe Biden assumes the US presidency to see what direction Washington will take vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Mr Biden has said that he too favours a troop withdrawal, but wants to move more slowly. Indeed, this is a critical time for the Afghan peace process.

Any major discrepancy in American policy may affect the peace deal the US signed with the Afghan Taliban in February, and a chaotic withdrawal of foreign troops may plunge Afghanistan back into civil war. Foreign forces, primarily America, must ensure that the withdrawal is orderly, while Afghan stakeholders — especially the government and the Taliban — must put in greater efforts for an internal peace deal.

Social media rules

THE dreaded outcome of the state's relentless campaign to control social media has become a reality. With the notification of the 'Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020' under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, the government now has legal cover to issue blanket bans on digital content. The rules apply to any social media company operating in Pakistan and require them to set up a brick-and-mortar presence in the country with the goal of eventually moving data servers here.

Given the state's proclivity for surveillance, clamping down on free expression and hounding journalists and activists who use social media to share information, this development marks a dark chapter in Pakistan's digital rights story. In a continuation of this sinister tradition, the rules were gazetted without consultation with stakeholders, rights groups and citizens, despite initial promises that a discussion would take place. National and global digital rights groups have expressed outrage and concern over the rules for legitimate reasons. One worrying turnabout from the initial draft is the removal of the position of 'national coordinator' and the vesting of these powers with the historically censor-happy Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. Without providing adequate safeguards, the rules give sweeping powers to the PTA to ban and remove content, and

ironically also empowers it to conduct a review of its decisions. Its words “integrity, security and defence of Pakistan” make room for blocking content that can create “hatred, contempt or disaffection of government or public servants”. Effectively, this means whistleblowers and journalists can be censored when sharing critical views which “harm the reputation” of federal or provincial government officials. The Asia Internet Coalition which represents several social media platforms including Facebook, Google and Apple has pointed out that the rules were passed without a discussion, labelling the demands draconian as the data localisation requirements will prevent people from accessing a free and open internet. Tragically, the same demands will hurt Pakistan’s digital economy and cut it off from the rest of the world as they lay the groundwork for an intimidating regulatory environment which forces companies to go against their privacy and regulatory policies regarding “established human rights norms on privacy and freedom of expression”. Not only are these rules a historic own goal on the part of the Ministry of Information, they also cement the government’s reputation of being paranoid, restrictive and intolerant.

Crash probe findings

THE final findings of the Aircraft Accident and Investigation Board regarding the deadly 2016 PIA plane crash has once again brought the national flag carrier as well as the aviation industry regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, under the spotlight. Though the probe primarily blames PIA engineers for the three technical faults — a fractured power turbine blade, a broken pin inside the overspeed governor device, and contamination inside the propeller valve module — cited as the causes of the tragedy, the CAA cannot be excused for its lack of proper oversight. The inquiry confirms the findings of the preliminary report into the crash, which had also found lapses on the part of the airline and lack of oversight by the CAA to be responsible for the accident. The ill-fated PIA ATR-42 flight, that was on its way to Islamabad, had crashed into the hills near Havelian, killing all 47 passengers — including singer-turned-evangelist Junaid Jamshed — and crew on board, 42 minutes after taking off from Chitral.

That it took the investigation board, which works under the CAA, four long years to finalise the report speaks volumes for the outrageous manner in which both the airline and the flight industry regulator have in the past tried to blunt the impact of such inquiries to protect their own. Little concern is ever shown for the

families of those who have lost their near and dear ones in these avoidable tragedies. We do not know if any action was taken against those found responsible. One would not be surprised if they were not taken to task for their carelessness that cost so many lives. PIA has been struggling with massive financial and technical troubles for the last two decades. The inquiry report will surely raise questions about the quality of its human resource as well. Similarly, the oversight role of the CAA will come under greater public scrutiny. It is time that a decision is taken on PIA's affairs and the CAA is overhauled to prevent future tragedies.

Modi's tirade

THE prime minister of India is at it again. In a series of tweets, Narendra Modi has hurled unsubstantiated allegations against Pakistan. Taking to the micro-blogging site, Mr Modi texted that Indian security forces had "neutralised" four terrorists from Jaish-e-Mohammad and recovered a huge cache of weapons.

His allegation has been rubbished by the Pakistani Foreign Office with the curtness that it merits. A spokesman of the Chinese foreign ministry, speaking hours after the tweets, also reinforced Pakistan's positive contributions against global terrorism. It comes as little surprise that the Indian leader resorted to such wildly inaccurate allegations, without a shred of proof, in the wake of Pakistan issuing a well-evidenced dossier showing India's state-sponsored terrorism in this country. The dossier has proof of how Indian intelligence agency RAW has been recruiting agents as well as training and financing them to carry out acts of violence on Pakistani soil. Pakistan has done well to share this evidence with important countries. Mr Modi's response is weak. It is also clichéd.

However, it portends danger. Mr Modi and his hard-line advisers continue to revel in their belligerence against Pakistan. Such belligerence, they believe, is an extension of their domestic politics, which in turn means that their approach towards Pakistan is linked to the failures and successes of their policies at home. These policies are wrapped in anti-Muslim hysteria and have manifested themselves in acts of horrendous violence against Muslims. This naked fascism pollutes their thinking on Pakistan and is reinforced by their failures in India-held Kashmir.

The Balakot incident in which Indian aircraft intruded into Pakistani territory, and Pakistan's swift and decisive response by downing two of their fighter planes shortly thereafter contains lessons for both countries. India should have learnt that Pakistan will hit back if its territorial integrity is violated; Pakistan should learn that India under Mr Modi will not refrain from such mischief. These lessons have consequences.

The latest outburst should be of concern to all, and should alert Pakistan to New Delhi's intentions. Pakistan has successfully fought off the attack by India in the FATF and it is hoped that in a short period of time it will be taken off the grey list. Regrettably, across the border there are all too many signs of intolerance and obscurantism creeping into a society that is governed by a party which has made 'ethnic cleansing' a part of state policy. The danger to Pakistan is obvious.

The world must take note of India's increasing bellicosity as it suffers from a thousand self-inflicted cuts of failures in occupied Kashmir. The contrast couldn't be starker. Prime Minister Imran Khan has from his first day in office been offering a hand of peace to Mr Modi. The gesture has been repeatedly rebuffed. India should know that the desire for peace does not reflect weakness of resolve on Pakistan's part.

Spate of murders

THE bloodletting in the name of faith continues, and the silence from official quarters on this needless loss of life is deafening. On Friday, Tahir Ahmed, a 31-year-old Ahmadi doctor was shot dead inside his home in Nankana Sahib, Punjab, by a teenager armed with a pistol. The attacker had knocked on the front door and started firing when the young man opened it. Other members of the family who were gathered there for prayers were also wounded, including his father — who remains critically injured in hospital — and two uncles. This is at least the fourth faith-based murder of members of the Ahmadi community since July. Last month, Prof Dr Naeemuddin Khattak was gunned down in a targeted attack in Peshawar; in August, Meraj Ahmed, a trader was shot dead in the same city; and in July, an American national named Tahir Naseem was slain by a 19-year-old in a Peshawar courtroom. Mr Naseem was an under-trial prisoner accused of committing blasphemy. Also, in September there was a near lynching

in the same city; the targets of the mob were rescued by police, though one of them was later charged with having committed blasphemy.

In a country where preachers spewing hate and bigotry can acquire the status of superstars, where shrines are raised to venerate those who commit murder in the name of religion, minorities cannot but live in a perpetual state of fear. Certain minorities even more so. Prejudice against them is so deep, so visceral, that acting on it is celebrated as a virtue by sections of society. As Friday's killing shows, it pursues them even into the privacy of their homes. However, murder is but the most extreme manifestation of this hatred; every day must doubtless bring with it a myriad indignities, too many to count — in the marketplace, in educational institutions and in the workplace. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that our society has dehumanised the Ahmadi community to a point where they are defined only by their religious belief, rather than being seen as what they are: citizens of Pakistan who have an inalienable right to the protection of the state. But the state has been found sadly wanting, indeed absent. Until every minority community, without exception, has confidence that the state will punish those who incite and commit violence against them, Pakistan cannot be considered a safe place for minorities.

New Zealand tour

THE Pakistan cricket team's upcoming tour of New Zealand will be a test of skills and nerves for the players, not least for skipper Babar Azam who will be leading the side in Tests for the first time, having replaced Azhar Ali recently. The 35-member national squad, which embarks on its tour on Monday to play three T20s and two Test matches, will immediately be quarantined upon their arrival at Lincoln before the start of the matches from Dec 18. The swashbuckling Babar, who had been leading Pakistan in the ODIs and T20s, has now been saddled with the Test captaincy, a decision that has not gone down well with former players and cricket experts. A good number of them, including former captains Zaheer Abbas and Intikhab Alam, warned the PCB to not overburden the 26-year-old who has been the team's batting mainstay for over two years now. However, Babar himself appears all set for the challenge and has expressed confidence in his team to give hosts New Zealand a run for their money in all games. The team is a blend of youth and experience and includes a number of uncapped players too, such as Amad Butt, Danish Aziz, Imran Butt and Rohail

Nazir who impressed the selectors with their form, technique and temperament. Pakistan enjoyed success against Zimbabwe at home last month and the players appear to be in form after the Pakistan Super League.

Having said that, successive defeats in Tests and T20 games in Australia and England in the past year or so have raised serious questions about the team's competitive abilities against the world's best sides, especially during tours abroad. New Zealand is a tough adversary at home. Led by Kane Williamson, they have a sound batting line-up and a battery of fast bowlers who can make life difficult for the Pakistani batsmen. The cricketers, therefore, must ensure that they adapt quickly to playing conditions and practise hard to start the series in a positive frame of mind.

New SOE framework

THE government appears to have finally agreed upon some sort of framework for dealing with state-owned enterprises which have negatively impacted the economy both in terms of fiscal losses and poor, cost-ineffective service delivery. While the full details of the strategy formulated to handle SOEs are still awaited, it seems from what the prime minister's adviser on institutional reforms, Dr Ishrat Husain, has said, that the government is moving towards a mixed ownership model, which has successfully been employed in several countries to manage large public enterprises.

The journey towards this model will begin with the division of SOEs such as the Pakistan Railways, PIA and Pakistan Steel Mills into smaller companies operating different businesses that are currently being managed by the parent entity. In some cases, the authorities have prepared financial restructuring plans to revive companies such as PIA. The "unbundling and financial restructuring" of these entities will be followed by retrenchments, or rightsizing, of employees — always a matter of concern — and the divestment of assets like excess land in the case of PSM. Additionally, the government plans to hire 'competent' individuals, most likely Pakistanis living abroad, for senior positions in the new entities.

Governments have attempted to take care of these enterprises since the 1980s with some success in certain sectors and total failure in others. Most large banks, and cement, fertiliser, telecom and other businesses were successfully

deregulated and sold to the private sector as the initial emphasis of policymakers shifted from supporting public-sector enterprises to their privatisation in the 1990s and beyond. While the move proved successful in certain cases, the attempts to reform or sell power companies failed except in the case of the divestment of KESC. Likewise, repeated attempts to restructure and reform PIA, PR and PSM have also proved futile — in fact, affairs at these organisations have worsened.

Previously, we have seen various governments pursue different strategies and fail because of the absence of an overall policy and framework for managing SOEs. Past reforms and strategies to fix SOEs were based on the assumption that privatisation was the only solution to fix public-sector businesses. In reality, the SOEs are seen as an “essential element of most economies, including many more advanced economies ... especially in strategic sectors such as energy, minerals, infrastructure ... and ... financial services”.

According to the OECD, public-sector organisations have come to constitute more than a fifth of the “world’s largest enterprises”. In Pakistan, had they been managed properly, these entities could have been the primary vehicle of fast-paced performance as seen in other countries. Instead, the burden of inefficient SOEs on the economy has become too large for any government to handle, and allowing the damage to fester will only exacerbate the challenge. But in countries like Pakistan, everything cannot be left to privatisation either — which is why a mixed ownership model merits serious discussion.

Pompeo’s tour

US SECRETARY of State Mike Pompeo’s recent farewell tour of a settlement in the occupied West Bank and the Israel-occupied Golan Heights in Syria encapsulates what the attitude of the Trump White House has been towards the Arab-Israeli conflict: embrace Tel Aviv — fully and without question — and offer the Arabs scraps from the table and term it the ‘deal of the century’. Observers have noted that this was the highest-level visit of an American official to an illegal Israeli settlement, as well as the occupied Golan. Most of the world community acknowledges the West Bank and Golan Heights as occupied territories, but on Donald Trump’s watch the official US position has shifted to ‘gifting’ these two areas to Israel. Furthermore, the decision to recognise the disputed city of

Jerusalem as the capital of the Zionist state was another move by Mr Trump to deny the Palestinians their historical rights, and reward Israel's decades of occupation and illegalities. Mr Pompeo also described the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which seeks to "end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians" as "anti-Semitic". Moreover, while in the Golan, he had the gall to say that "this is a part of Israel". Both the Palestinians and the Syrians have slammed the American official's visit as provocative.

While the Trump administration did all it could to bury the dream of a Palestinian state forever, and ensure Israel was not reproached for its brutality, all eyes will be on how Joe Biden handles this sensitive file come January. For sure, both Mr Biden and his choice for vice president Kamala Harris are staunchly pro-Israel, as are most members of the American political class. While Mr Biden may reverse American recognition of illegal settlements, he has stated that he will not change his predecessor's decision on Jerusalem. Unfortunately, this means that Palestinian hopes for justice from the new US administration will remain unrealised. What is more, one after the other the Palestinians' Arab 'brothers' are joining the queue to recognise Israel, with or without a just settlement of the Palestinian question. Therefore, the outlook for the region does not look good. Deprived of justice, and confronting sustained Israeli brutalities, the Palestinians will continue to resist, while their detractors will wrongfully label them as 'enemies of peace' for rejecting inherently flawed and unjust 'peace' plans, and demanding the rights that were snatched from their forefathers over seven decades ago.

KCR's rebirth

EVEN though it is no cause for jubilation, as Minister for Railways Sheikh Rashid Ahmed would have us believe, it is no reason for going into mourning either. It is a bit of good news, and encourages us to believe that our rulers can sometimes do good. On Thursday, some two frustrating decades after it was wound up, the Karachi Circular Railway chugged along its tracks for a modest — and basically symbolic — run to conform to a Supreme Court order and thus avoid contempt. 'Circular' by nomenclature, the KCR's initial run is rather straight, with trains taking an excruciatingly long 90 minutes to travel between Pipri and City Station, a distance of 46 km. Though the ebullient minister reduced the fare from Rs50 to Rs30, it is doubtful if the KCR trains' speed will attract commuters en masse. To be worth its name, an urban mass transit system should be comfortable and fast.

The KCR has neither of these attributes. In fact, it is absurd to think of the KCR in terms of a mass transit system for a sprawling city of many millions like Karachi. Even when the loop is complete after the Frontier Works Organisation has done its job on bridges and underground passages, the KCR will be a mere adjunct to Karachi's ambitious and idyllic mass transit plan, which for decades has continued to exist only on paper.

In theory, Pakistan's biggest city will have four bus rapid transit lines running along 113 km of roads. However, such is the 'progress' on the BRT project that the Rs16bn Green Line, on which work began in 2016, is still incomplete, while the cost has shot up to Rs30bn. Awaiting attention are the yellow, orange and red lines. This means a modern rapid transit system is nowhere on the horizon. Given Pakistan's political ecology, it is doubtful if Karachiites expect the full spectrum of the KCR-BRT system to be operational before at least a decade. What is lacking is political will.

Putting all at risk

THE collective recklessness of our political parties, including the opposition and the ruling PTI, has resulted in an alarming increase in the number of Covid-19 cases in the country. In recent weeks, rallies in major cities, a huge election campaign in Gilgit-Baltistan and a mass funeral for the TLP chief have demonstrated how far removed the coronavirus threat is from the minds of our political leaders.

While the PML-N, PPP and JUI-F took the lead in calling supporters to superspreader gatherings under the PDM alliance banner, the Jamaat-i-Islami was responsible for a similar folly in Swat as thousands assembled for a public meeting called by the party. The PTI, too, is guilty of pre-pandemic style electioneering in GB as well as for holding big conventions in the capital.

The actions of the political leaders who lead these parties are supremely irresponsible and betray a careless approach to a virus that has destroyed lives and livelihoods all over the world. Even more disappointing is that the opposition is likely to skip a critical meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Coronavirus Disease this week as part of their decision to spurn the National Assembly speaker whom they accuse of biased conduct. For all these reasons, it is hardly surprising that global health expert Zulfiqar A. Bhutta in a piece for this paper

described the Covid-19 public discourse and the response in Pakistan as “akin to watching a crash landing in slow motion”. The PDM, then, would do well to put off all its rallies until safer times arrive.

The lowering of the curve in August saw both the provincial and federal authorities adopt far too relaxed an approach to preventive practices and resume public activities with a gusto that would have made one think that the pandemic was over. Unfortunately, that is far from the truth.

The reality is dreary: Covid-19 cases are rising to dangerous levels, with a national positivity ratio racing past 7pc. In Azad Kashmir, KP and Sindh, this ratio is even higher at 11.45pc, 9.85pc and 9.63pc respectively. In Punjab, the cities of Rawalpindi, Multan, Lahore and Faisalabad are becoming hotspots, whereas cases in Gilgit and Islamabad are also rising. According to the NCOC, the number of critically ill patients admitted to hospitals with Covid-19 has increased two-fold in the last fortnight. The average daily death toll in the last seven days was recorded at 35. Worryingly, nearly a fifth of total positive cases are from educational institutions. Why these figures are not self-explanatory for political leaders is anyone's guess.

This head-in-the-sand attitude is unacceptable and warrants a dramatic change. Those responsible for improving the lives of Pakistani citizens are, instead, putting them at risk. If the present rising tide of positive cases is not stemmed, infected patients will be helpless as hospitals become overwhelmed. The people and healthcare workers of this country deserve better.

Iran's overture

THE US-Iran relationship has been characterised by confrontation ever since 1979, when Tehran, following Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, broke away from the American orbit and chose to chart its own path. There have been several ups and downs — mostly downs — over the past four decades, but Donald Trump's four years as president were arguably the worst when it came to the bilateral relationship. At one point, following the American assassination of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq earlier this year, it seemed as if war was imminent. Moreover, the American unilateral exit from the Iran nuclear deal, and Washington's 'maximum pressure' policy targeting the Iranian economy, ensured that both states remained in a state of perpetual confrontation. Now,

with Joe Biden headed to the White House, the relationship may go back to being far less combative. As a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry told a press conference on Sunday, “carefully considered exchanges” between Washington and Tehran are possible despite America’s “repeated crimes”. Mr Biden has also earlier indicated he may return to the nuclear deal.

Indeed, engagement and dialogue are always preferable to combative rhetoric, especially in a tinderbox such as the Middle East. However, considering the high-pitched rhetoric that has been emanating from Washington during the Trump era, re-engaging Iran will not be easy. The powerful conservative faction in Tehran will be even more wary of dealing with the US, especially after the Soleimani strike and the American exit from the nuclear deal. If Mr Biden is serious about reopening channels with Iran, he needs to put in place confidence-building measures. For a start, he can start peeling away the layers of American sanctions that have contributed to destroying Iran’s economy. These sanctions have scared away foreign investors even after Iran was given some relief under the nuclear deal. However, considering Joe Biden’s closeness to Israel, talking to Tehran will be tough. For example, Benjamin Netanyahu, in a reckless statement addressed to the US president-elect, has said “there can be no going back” to the JCPOA, while America’s Gulf Arab allies, now working in lockstep with Tel Aviv, will also protest loudly any attempts by Mr Biden to soften his Iran policy. The challenge before the new incumbent of the White House is considerable. Either he can ignore such pressure and extend the hand of peace to Iran, or continue on a collision course with Tehran.

Food expenditure

INCREASING food prices are perhaps the last thing that people, especially those falling in the low-middle-income bracket in a pandemic-hit economy, need. But that is precisely what they are getting in spite of the repeated official rhetoric against the ‘mafias’. For more than one year, rapidly increasing inflation, particularly the runaway prices of food items, has become the new norm in the country. Even though CPI inflation has come down to around 9pc during the last two months after peaking to over 14pc in January, the pace of increase in food prices continues to test the economic pain threshold of low-income groups. Consequently, a vast majority of people are finding it hard to manage their

already impoverished lifestyles because of their growing daily expenditure on food items.

Data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics for the month of October shows that rural food inflation rose much more rapidly when compared to the urban food price hike. Food prices in the urban areas had gone up by 13.9pc and by 17.7pc in the rural areas, according to the published data. Initially, food inflation was pushed by the increasing shortage of wheat and sugar in the country. However, the current wave of inflation is mostly driven by the sharp hike in prices of fresh vegetables such as potatoes, onions and tomatoes, as well as items like pulses, eggs, etc that are used on a daily basis by the low-middle-income segments of the population. The State Bank of Pakistan has in recent months repeatedly pointed out that supply-side constraints and disruptions are to blame for this crippling increase in food prices, which have almost everyone worried. But despite being aware of the problem, we have yet to see a strong effort on the part of the government to address the issues that have been responsible for driving the prices upwards. It is an indictment of the rulers of the day when citizens do not have enough to feed their families.

Secret meeting?

REPORTS that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a clandestine visit to the northern Saudi city of Neom to meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Sunday have sparked a firestorm of rumours. The Saudis have flatly denied that the Israeli leader set foot on their soil; however, officials in Tel Aviv — in typically Israeli fashion — have adopted a more ambiguous tone. Several media outlets in Israel say the visit indeed took place, while a member of the state's security cabinet has said on record that "the meeting happened".

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that fervent moves are being made in the shadows to bring the Arabs and Israel closer to each other, with the Trump administration very publicly calling for recognition of the Jewish state, particularly by Saudi Arabia.

While over the past few months the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan have struck peace deals with Israel, it would be a game changer were Saudi Arabia to do so. Officially, Riyadh sticks to the position that there would be no peace with Israel unless the Palestine question is resolved. But it is difficult to believe that the Gulf

states would have gone ahead without Saudi Arabia's blessing. Moreover, because Islam's holiest sites are on Saudi soil, Riyadh's recognition of Tel Aviv would have a great impact on the Muslim world. There have also been indications that Pakistan faces pressure from some of its powerful foreign friends to embrace Israel.

As this paper has stated before, there is nothing wrong with Muslim states pursuing ties with Israel as long as the Palestine issue is resolved to the Arab side's satisfaction. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be a possibility as the Palestinians have rejected the recent peace deals between Arab states and Israel. The reason remains clear; those who rule Israel have no intention of going back to the 1967 borders and living in harmony with the Palestinians by giving them back the land that was stolen from them. In fact, the Palestinians are being offered a so-called 'deal of the century', which is in fact an instrument of surrender designed to declare a clear victory for Israel, and perpetual humiliation for the Arabs.

The Palestinians continue to resist because they are denied basic human rights and dignity. Going back to the Arabs' dealings with Israel, it is apparent that these moves are being made to please the Trump administration, which is soon to exit Washington. However, if the new Arab-Israeli alliance is being cemented to confront Iran and its regional allies, then instead of peace more instability can be expected, as Tehran's arch-nemesis Israel now has a foothold in the Gulf. The weeks ahead may unravel new surprises in this regard and states, including Pakistan, will have to mould their policies accordingly.

Synchronised intel

PUTTING together an accurate threat assessment demands intelligence nuggets to be assembled together to form a coherent picture. If too many pieces of the jigsaw are missing, the result can be disastrous. Seen in this light, Prime Minister Imran Khan's go-ahead for setting up the National Intelligence Coordination Committee is a logical step — at least on the face of it. Helmed by the DG ISI as its chairman, the NICC will serve to coordinate a number of intelligence organisations in the country. The Abbottabad Commission investigating the US raid to capture Osama bin Laden in 2011 had noted the absence of a mechanism

whereby civil and military intelligence could be integrated and had recommended that such a body be set up.

A lack of synchronised intelligence can indeed compromise the readiness of security operations. The *raison d'être* for setting up the Abbottabad Commission was itself the result of a massive intelligence failure by Pakistani authorities. A number of large-scale terrorist attacks have also been successfully carried out because of a lack of intelligence integration between different agencies. For example, the storming of Bannu jail by the TTP in April 2012 resulted in 384 prisoners being sprung from prison. With some hard-core terrorists among the freed inmates, the incident marked a significant setback for Pakistan's war against militancy. There was also the horrific APS Peshawar attack on Dec 16, 2014, also carried out by the TTP, in which nearly 150 people lost their lives. Despite the school being located in a high-security zone, the terrorists managed to arrive at the destination undetected and launch their murderous assault without facing resistance. However, while there may be sound arguments for the establishment of the NICC, it is worth noting that the National Counter Terrorism Authority will come under it. Established via an executive order in 2009, Nacta was conceived as a body that would coordinate the counterterrorism efforts of civilian and military intelligence agencies — in short, the role that the NICC will now be playing. A turf war between the various agencies that were unwilling to share information, and a tussle over its leadership left Nacta moribund for several years. One wonders why it has now been relegated to a lower rung on the intelligence ladder. In any case, it is to be hoped that the mandate of each agency will be well defined in the new set-up and that none will be used to encroach on civil liberties.

Journalists at risk

THE Independent High-Level Legal Panel, backed by the Media Freedom Coalition, has been a busy forum since its establishment in 2019. It has taken up the matter of security for journalists working in trying conditions, often under hostile governments, with the seriousness that the issue demands. In its third report on media freedom published on Monday, the IHLLP has not limited itself to asking Commonwealth governments to implement its recommendations to provide safe refuge to journalists in danger. In fact, it has come up with pathways that can rescue journalists from perilous situations. The report makes nine

important recommendations, including a suggestion to introduce an emergency visa for journalists at risk and for their immediate families. In case the passports of such journalists are revoked by their country, it is recommended that they be provided urgent documents to travel to safety. The provision of security under the Refugee Convention is recommended for journalists who should be allowed to apply for asylum from within their own country. Yet another recommendation calls for measures to prevent victimisation of journalists on occasions such as when an extradition is sought on the basis of red warrants.

Professional unions have hailed the direction advised by the report. More than 450 journalists were forced into exile between 2010 and 2015; almost 400 were detained last year. Over 60 journalists went 'too far' and were missing in 2018 — numbers that again doubled over a decade. Pakistan features prominently in the report as one of the countries from where the 15 individual cases for the study have been taken. The applause the report has received from the Commonwealth Journalists Association was expected. The next good thing would be for all members of the Commonwealth family and the world at large to join the cause in earnest. Only six of the 40 governments that have joined the coalition and signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom are from the Commonwealth. What steps have the rest taken to protect journalists?

Curbing rape

THE PTI government has evidently decided there is no time to lose in bringing about legislation to curb the incidence of rape in the country. To that end, the federal cabinet in a meeting chaired by the prime minister on Tuesday approved in principle two anti-rape ordinances. These expand the definition of rape and incorporate within it the terms 'transgender' and 'gang-rape', and widen the scope of punishment to include chemical castration. The proposed legislation also bans the humiliating and controversial two-finger test in rape cases, and mandates the establishment of rape crisis centres and special courts to try alleged perpetrators.

A series of bone-chilling rape cases of late have left the public shaken and the government scrambling to appear proactive. There was, for example, the gang rape late one night in September of a woman in front of her children while they were stranded in their stalled car on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway. Earlier this

month, a mother and her minor daughter were raped over two days in Kashmore, Sindh, an incident particularly horrific in its details.

The law can often do with improvements to close loopholes, remove ambiguities etc, all with the objective of enabling justice to be done. Thus the expansion of the currently narrow definition of rape in terms of what acts constitute this crime and who can be defined as victims is an appropriate step. However, the proposal of chemical castration is problematic, especially on practical grounds.

The procedure is employed in several countries and some parts of the US to reduce recidivism rates, but it is no 'quick fix'. Offered to paedophiles as an option in exchange for more lenient prison sentences or as a condition of parole, the treatment — which is not inexpensive — is only effective while it is continued. Several rights' advocates also contend that castration of rapists is based on a misunderstanding of the crime of rape, which is about power — not sexual gratification. Rather than the severity of punishment, which may satisfy populist objectives, the best deterrent is certainty of punishment, and for that the quality of investigation must be improved.

Mercifully, the cabinet in Tuesday's meeting decided against hanging rapists publicly, as advocated by some lawmakers. While Dawn is opposed to capital punishment in any form, it can be argued that the death penalty as punishment for rape can put victims at greater risk of being silenced forever by their attackers. Moreover, Pakistan is increasingly drifting away from its claim upon partially lifting the moratorium on capital punishment in December 2014 that it would apply it only to those convicted of terrorism. Finally, one must question why the government is planning more legislation by ordinance. The proposed legal changes should go through the normal, democratic procedure of being tabled in parliament, debated and then enacted as law. This expediency serves no purpose.

Covid messaging

THE repeated Covid-19 warnings from the NCOC point to a dangerous future, yet many politicians, including those in government, and citizens are refusing to take the threat seriously. Planning Minister Asad Umar this week predicted that a failure to take preventive measures may thrust the country towards the situation witnessed in June, when hospitals were overwhelmed with infected patients. With

new Covid-19 cases crossing 3,000 and deaths almost 60 in a 24-hour period, it appears that we are on track to a crippling new peak — one that may well surpass the hospitalisations, infections and deaths of the first wave which hit in the summer months. In several countries, the beginning of winter has brought a renewed challenge as Covid-19 cases spread faster. In Pakistan, the winter months trigger respiratory illnesses due to smog and high levels of pollution, a phenomenon that will further complicate the Covid-19 picture.

There are certain timely steps that have been taken by the authorities to address the problem of rising cases, one of which is school closure as a result of the significant spread of the virus in educational institutes. However, the difficult decisions cannot stop there if this devil-may-care attitude on the part of our authorities and even the general public continues. The Sindh government for instance, which had an exemplary Covid-19 response in the first wave, has this time around been utterly irresponsible. In going ahead with their participation in PDM rallies and preparing to observe their foundation day at a public meeting in Multan next week, their approach at this critical time shows a tremendously disappointing shift from the earlier unequivocal and science-led strategy. The federal government, too, despite the prime minister's warnings to the public, has failed to deliver an effective message about Covid-19 to citizens, who are happy to go about life without face coverings and attending large gatherings. Neither have doctors and law-enforcement officials issued the kind of public warnings and projections we saw in the first wave, despite the daily Covid-19 stats painting a stark picture. Overall, energy across the board is low even though the circumstances demand a robust and committed message. Prolonged carelessness has forced other countries into a lockdown, which has hurt livelihoods and damaged schooling and mental health, to save the healthcare system from total collapse. If we continue down this dark path, Pakistan, too, will have no choice but to shut down.

Unchanged interest rate

THE decision taken by the State Bank of Pakistan to continue an accommodative monetary policy by keeping its policy rate unchanged at 7pc comes as no surprise. It is in line with market expectations. The bank believes that inflation will remain within 7pc to 9pc and notes that domestic economic recovery has gradually gained traction (since July) in line with growth projections of slightly

above 2pc for the present fiscal year. Business confidence has improved. Nevertheless, it warns, there are considerable risks to the outlook, for instance, the resurgence of Covid-19 infections. Still, according to the bank's monetary policy statement, the risks to the outlook for both "growth and inflation appear balanced for policymakers".

By keeping the real interest rates in negative territory despite CPI inflation of around 9pc during the last two months, the bank has clearly signalled its willingness to continue divergence from its previous 'forward-looking' policy stance until it cannot. Aside from a better economic outlook and range-bound inflationary projections, the recent improvements in the current account and on the fiscal side, as well as the suspension of the loan deal with the IMF since February, are also helping the bank resist the temptation of raising the policy rate. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the State Bank will not increase the cost of credit for the private sector or the government, the single largest customer of commercial banks, until the Covid-19 challenge is over. The sharp reduction in the interest rate has proved perhaps to be the most effective measure among a raft of pro-growth actions implemented by both bank and government in the wake of the pandemic in reviving economic activities and encouraging investment ever since the lockdown restrictions were lifted. Even the improvement on the fiscal side is due to lower interest rates to a large extent, allowing the government to jack up its spending on development schemes. The reversal of the policy stance in the near- to medium-term could easily shatter the current growth momentum.

Gas shortages

AT a recent press conference, the prime minister's special assistant on petroleum, Nadeem Babar, gave the impression that the country would not face a major gas shortage this winter. Mr Babar claimed the government was making all-out efforts to maximise supplies in the gas network through increased RLNG imports. In the same breath, he cautioned that consumers at the tail-end of the pipeline network could experience low pressure, which is just a roundabout way of warning of impending shortages. The SAPM's claim came as a surprise to those who have been following his statements on the issue in recent months; all along he has warned of a severe gas shortage in the wake of depleting domestic reserves and growing demand. What steps have been taken to balance supply

and demand? He didn't reveal any, except to say that the two RLNG terminals in Karachi will be operated at their full capacity of 1,200mmcf during the winter.

Even if we consider the rationing of the fuel by gas distribution companies for some sectors, LNG industry sources estimate the present shortage to be somewhere between 200mmcf and 300mmcf. These figures are projected to rise with a further drop in temperature. No one knows how the government plans to fill the growing supply gap during the peak winter months even if it buys the excess regasification capacity of 150mmcf available with one of the two terminal operators. Apparently, the SAPM had called the press conference to respond to what he termed was a politically motivated media campaign against the government regarding the volume and price of LNG imports. He insisted that the figures given by a TV show host were "fudged", contending that 35 LNG cargo ships had been imported in the last 27 months at a lower rate as compared to the LNG agreement signed by the previous government with Qatar. He also sought to clarify that it was not possible to lock in cargoes during peak summer months when spot prices are at their lowest, for peak winters when prices shoot up. But what does it mean for consumers who still have to face gas shortages and low pressure in spite of paying higher prices?

Recurring gas shortage cannot be alleviated without ramping up RLNG imports as domestic gas reserves are drying up and no new major discovery has been made. However, LNG imports cannot be stepped up without radical changes in LNG policy to ensure the creation of a competitive RLNG market. Government policies and red tape are major hurdles in the way of the construction of new LNG terminals. Investors are unwilling to risk their money and want bureaucratic barriers to entry dismantled, infrastructure for evacuation of gas from the terminal built and a free market mechanism adopted. Mr Babar should explain why the government has not been able to reform its policy in the last two years.

Halting UAE visas

IT appears that the Pakistani workforce in the UAE, along with labour from some other, mostly Muslim, countries, has become an unfortunate casualty of the Middle East's changing geopolitics. While the actual reasons for halting employment and visit visas by the UAE are not clear at the moment, the move

coincides with the advent of diplomatic relations between the Emirates and Israel, with the pressure on other Muslim states to similarly engage with Tel Aviv.

In a recent interview, Prime Minister Imran Khan indicated that Pakistan had also come under such pressure. Speculation has been rife on other counts as well, including security and Covid-19 concerns. In an attempt to end these conjectures, the Foreign Office has said that the matter was not linked to security. In addition, SAPM Zulfikar Bukhari has gone so far as to assert that the UAE authorities said there was “no ban on the export of Pakistani workforce”.

This is at variance with the position of the UAE which has confirmed that the non-issuance of visas “till further notice” applies to employment for and visits by Pakistanis under 65 years of age. Already some reports have suggested that, since the ban came into effect on Nov 18, one recruitment agency in Rawalpindi has lost 3,000 jobs that have now been diverted to India.

The truth is that there will continue to be a great deal of insecurity and speculation unless the UAE and subsequently Pakistan make clear, officially, the actual reasons behind the move. The approach of the UAE has been disappointing and discriminatory. That a country which is home to 1.2m Pakistanis — making up a huge bulk of its population — is arbitrarily taking such a harsh position on the entry of Pakistani citizens is deeply troubling and can have serious implications for long-term ties.

Not only must this approach be challenged by the Foreign Office, it should also be taken up by the prime minister at the highest level, as it spells doom for thousands of Pakistanis working in the UAE. In its annual report, the State Bank of Pakistan warned that forced repatriation of Pakistanis who work abroad could create grave problems for the economy, as there are no jobs that can absorb them in the workforce here. In a post-Covid economy, this would spell disaster. The seriousness of this situation should not be lost on the government, which must address the issue immediately.

Adios, Diego

WHILE history will decide who can lay claim to the title of greatest footballer ever, for sure Diego Armando Maradona has led the pack so far, along with the indomitable Pelé. Maradona, who passed away on Wednesday, showed on the

football field why the sport is labelled the Beautiful Game, with his magical legwork and stunning goals. From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s he dominated the game. On the field, he made short work of defenders and scored goals that have gone down in the history books and are today studied by youngsters and pros alike. His only World Cup triumph came in 1986, when he helped his native Argentina defeat the West Germans in a memorable final in Mexico City's Estadio Azteca. On the club level, he represented Boca Juniors in his home country, as well as Barcelona and Napoli in the European leagues. Maradona was a global football superstar, inspiring youngsters from Buenos Aires to Beijing to take up the sport.

From very humble origins Maradona rose to the pinnacle of world sport. However, his career was far from perfect and substance abuse dogged him even during his peak. He also suffered from poor health later in life. One can only imagine what feats he could have achieved had he managed to conquer his inner demons. Maradona was also a very political man, maintaining friendships with some of Latin America's major leftist leaders, including the iconic Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. The impact he has left on the world is deep, as tributes have poured in from across the globe. Argentina has declared three days of mourning while football greats Pelé, Gary Lineker and Lionel Messi, amongst others, have all expressed grief at Maradona's death. Though not a very tall man, Maradona was a true giant on the field and indeed on the world stage, where he combined the personae of athlete, entertainer and public figure. Adios, Diego, and thanks for all the stunning football.

A depressing shift

THE PPP's trajectory on Covid-19 was a promising one during the first wave, but today, the party's approach to the alarming surge in infections can be compared to that of an ostrich with its head buried in the sand. This week, party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari tested positive for Covid-19 and went into isolation, yet his party continues to fully participate in the opposition PDM's rallies and is encouraging its supporters to attend a planned event in Multan.

This is a depressing change from its earlier position when the PPP was clear in its messaging and actions on prevention protocols. In fact, Mr Bhutto-Zardari himself is one of the few politicians who is rarely seen in public without a mask,

and is very aware of the serious nature of the potentially fatal virus. The fact that he, the Sindh chief minister and prominent PPP leader Qamar Zaman Kaira all tested positive despite taking precautions should be a wake-up call. But no such reckoning appears to be on the cards.

Far from the initial days of inspiring confidence by adopting a science-led approach to the pandemic, the current phase has seen the PPP abandon its firm position as it continues to lead superspreader events. The PML-N, too, is equally guilty of blatant disregard for the threat emanating from Covid-19 as it holds massive public meetings under the PDM banner. The fact that Ms Maryam Nawaz is campaigning for the safety of students who are being forced to take the MDCAT exams, and therefore risk exposure, demonstrates that the party understands the health risks. Yet, it is going full steam ahead where PDM rallies are concerned.

All this is happening as new Covid-19 cases, daily deaths and hospitalisations are reaching precarious levels. The positivity rates in Karachi and Peshawar are close to 18pc and 20pc respectively. The number of critically ill patients admitted to hospitals with serious respiratory issues is growing. More and more people on social media are posting about health complications and even deaths caused by the virus. The number of officially recorded Covid-19 deaths outside hospitals, too, is rising. The situation is soon going to take a very ugly turn if the PDM does not rethink its strategy and pause these rallies until Covid-19 is under control.

Here, the failure of the government to engage with the opposition is also to blame. Acrimony and pettiness are apt descriptions for our national politics — and the PTI's aggressive stance vis-à-vis the opposition has not helped. With its penchant for arresting opposition leaders rather than engaging them in dialogue, it has created a perfect storm: an alienated opposition that is so fed up with the government's witch-hunt that it perceives every request or plea as doublespeak. Better sense must prevail all around before we plummet towards a national catastrophe.

‘A hundred projects’

CHAIRING a meeting to discuss the Karachi Transformation Plan, a scheme envisioned by the federal government to pump Rs1.1tr into Pakistan's biggest yet most neglected city, Prime Minister Imran Khan on Thursday announced that

over 100 projects had been planned for the Sindh capital. Along with the prime minister, the army chief and several federal ministers were in attendance. Moreover, Mr Khan was informed that 6,000 apartments were being built in the sprawling metropolis, and that anti-encroachment operations in Karachi would not go ahead unless alternative accommodation was arranged for the affected people. While these promises — especially of the 100 projects — are no doubt well-intentioned, the people of Karachi, rightly jaded after years, nay decades, of similar assurances that never saw the light of day, will believe it when they see it. The massive induction of funds was announced in September after an outcry in the city following the complete collapse of the civic infrastructure in the wake of August's torrential rains. The initial announcement was dogged by controversy, as the centre and Sindh government sparred over who would pay for the plan and who would oversee it. As of now, Karachiites have yet to see anything concrete where the plan is concerned, apart from a raft of promises that the city's infrastructure will be fixed under the scheme.

Thanks mainly to the Sindh government's accumulation of nearly all civic powers and the resultant emaciation of the province's local bodies, as well as the centre's lack of interest, Karachi today is in a shambles. While on the national scale there is grand talk of gleaming motorways, the city has to make do with potholed roads. Other urban centres have seen the launches of modern metro buses and trains, but Karachi's people travel in rickety 'Qingqi' rickshaws. As for the recently 'reborn' KCR, it has miles to go before it can play a meaningful role in resolving the city's transport problems. Encroachments and lack of potable water and proper drainage are other major issues affecting Pakistan's business capital. If the federal government is serious about resolving these multiple issues, it must, along with the Sindh administration, deliver a workable plan that can rehabilitate and develop Karachi as a 21st-century city. Moreover, all plans will come to naught unless there is a functioning municipal government to look after Karachi, one that is answerable to its residents. This is something the PPP-led Sindh government must reflect on.

Failure of education

THE educational institutions are closed because of Covid-19. The process of learning has to continue but the tools to ensure this leave a lot to be desired. An emergency model of instruction must promise continuity of learning to students

across class and income divide. It is all very well to see the increasing number of internet users as a sign of progress, even if this has been achieved because of lockdowns. But not everyone can access the cyberworld. More innovative methods are required. For instance, there are wide open spaces in rural areas and even towns that can be used for teaching students — if the elements permit. Examples from elsewhere also provide useful insight. Take teachers in India. Many of them record their lectures and then have mobile teams relay these in villages via speakers to learners who maintain a safe distance from each other. In Africa, the radio service has been put to good use; but in Pakistan, it is surprising that the ‘medium’ of paper hasn’t been emphasised enough by those trying to educate youngsters in these times. Indeed, written or printed notes and lectures sent to students regularly by schools can go a long way in addressing their lack of accessibility to fancier gadgets. Paper can reach where the internet cannot. Similarly, radio and television still have a role to play.

It is often presumed that those without facilities such as the internet and the tools required to access it are doomed. In this sense, junior-level students are at a greater disadvantage as compared to those in the senior classes who are much closer to completing their studies. This is a reflection of our lopsided priorities — and shows how miserably the state has failed to lay a solid foundation for schooling at the primary and pre-primary level. Even as we try to overcome this most trying phase, there is an opportunity to identify our lapses and strategise collectively for a better, more equal education in the months ahead.

Sacked workers

THE move was not unexpected. The government had made clear its intentions of sacking over 9,300 remaining employees of the Pakistan Steel Mills in June — despite all the pre-election promises of the PTI to revive the entity with the help of the existing workforce and through improvements in the company’s management.

Friday’s service termination orders to 4,544 PSM workers indicates just the start of the implementation of a new government plan to ‘reform and restructure’ SOEs in order to cut financial losses. The remaining workers will be sent home in the next few months if everything goes according to script. What will follow is the ‘downsizing’ or ‘rightsizing’ of staff in other public-sector businesses such as PIA.

At least half of the workers of the national flag carrier face the prospect of losing their jobs in the near future.

All this is in line with the recommendations made by the reforms committee headed by Adviser to the Prime Minister on Institutional Reforms and Austerity Ishrat Husain to reorganise state-run businesses before they are sold to the private sector, or revived under public-private partnership by hiring 'competent' overseas Pakistanis in key managerial positions, or through infusing new capital in their operations.

Most public-sector businesses have become a huge financial liability for the cash-strapped government, which is forced to spend billions of rupees every year to keep them operational as is the case with PIA and the railways and to pay workers' salaries at PSM. The argument for the need to cut down on the number of excess staff in SOEs, who are often recruited because of political and other reasons, may have some merit, but the question remains: is it right to abolish jobs in the public sector at a time when the government and the State Bank have doled out subsidised, soft loans amounting to billions of rupees to help private businesses maintain their payroll in view of the Covid-19 crisis? Even some of those inside the power circles will disagree with such arbitrary removals when the working classes are struggling to cope with the harsh economic situation caused by the pandemic.

With Covid-19 infections resurging and the fragile economic recovery facing serious risks, there could not have been a worse time to sack the PSM workers. Indeed, the move is an admission of the government's own failure; like its predecessors, it has been unable to devise a viable programme to resurrect the country's largest industrial enterprise at a time when the private sector is investing in new steel manufacturing capacities and technologies to take advantage of growing domestic needs amid rising steel demand. Had it taken timely action to restart production at the mill, perhaps through the infusion of capital, it could have saved a national asset and spared thousands of PSM workers the agony of losing their jobs.

PTV's role

PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan has nominated lawyer Naeem Bukhari as chairman of the state-run broadcaster PTV. Even before taking charge of his new

office, Mr Bukhari, himself a television personality, told reporters PTV will not provide any coverage to the opposition because it is meant to project the government. In a video statement issued recently, he reiterated that the main purpose of PTV was to project the government. Mr Bukhari is wrong. But unfortunately, he is not the only one who has misplaced notions about the role of a state broadcaster. The PTI is the latest in a long line of ruling parties that have harped on reforming PTV when in opposition and then rubbish such pious intentions once in power. If PTV today is a white elephant struggling for relevance in a swiftly transforming media environment, it is due to the myopic vision and faulty understanding of those who have the responsibility of overseeing the official media thrust upon them. However, in the present case it is indeed the prime minister himself who shares the bulk of the burden. His party's manifesto boasted about reforming PTV when it came to power, and Mr Khan is on record as having said the same thing when in opposition. From those noble intentions to Mr Bukhari's cavalier utterances — the PTI has indeed come a long way.

It is also the wrong way. The modern world has no place for archaic organisations like a state broadcaster generating no other content than stale and crude government propaganda. Instead, what holds value is what is called a 'public broadcaster'. Prime examples of taxpayer-funded public broadcasters are Britain's BBC, Canada's CBC and America's NPR. A public broadcaster caters primarily to the needs of the citizens, not of the government. Unshackled from the confines of commercially driven content, it carries the mandate to produce high-quality, credible and trustworthy content that adds value to the lives of citizens. A public broadcaster enriches democracy by providing people responsible and ethical news that reinforces social and cultural values while ensuring that viewers are not deprived of authentic information they require as citizens of a democratic state. Very few among our political parties seem to have a nuanced understanding of a public broadcaster's role. This is why Pakistanis are forced to carry the burden of PTV and endure the rigours of official propaganda spewed forth with relish by unqualified people like Mr Bukhari.

Covid-positive cricketers

IT is shocking that some members of the Pakistan cricket team in New Zealand have tested positive for Covid-19. Not only have doubts been raised about the

tour, the incident has also caused deep national embarrassment. The entire Pakistan contingent, currently serving a 14-day quarantine period, has been issued a final warning by health authorities in New Zealand after closed-circuit television footage showed a few members of the visiting squad contravening social-distancing protocols by mingling and having food in the hotel lobby. In the aftermath of the incident, permission for the players to train in isolation at their Christchurch hotel was also revoked. The hosts have made it clear to the visiting side that they would not tolerate any risky behaviour in a country that has practically eliminated the virus. Though Pakistan's tour party, led by skipper Babar Azam, tested negative before leaving Lahore last week, they were tested again for the virus soon after landing in New Zealand. Seven tested positive.

The whole episode reflects poorly on the players as well as the Pakistan team management for their failure to observe strict Covid-19 protocols. Experienced officials including Misbah-ul-Haq, Younis Khan, Waqar Younis and others accompanying the squad as coaching staff were expected to provide guidance to the players during overseas tours but, apparently, that did not happen. Besides, a majority of the team members in the current squad had to observe similar SOPs during Pakistan's tour of England in August this year and should not have been found wanting in their behaviour. The tour will take off with a three-match T20 series; the first game in Auckland is scheduled for Dec 18, followed by two Tests. However, the tour will be in jeopardy if there are further breaches. New Zealand Cricket said it is having discussions with the tourists to ensure they understand the quarantine requirements. PCB's chief executive Wasim Khan, too, has spoken to the players about the grim situation. It is hoped that there won't be more challenges.

An overreaction

PARANOIA followed by overreaction — that best describes how the Pakistani state views and responds to any form of independent thought. The latest instance veers into the realm of the farcical. On Friday, hundreds of youth in various cities took part in the 'Student Solidarity March' to voice their demands for free education, committees against sexual harassment on campus, provision of internet facilities and the restoration of student unions. The rallies were peaceful: the speakers did not incite violence and participants were 'armed' with little more than placards and flags. In Lahore, a few of them even stayed back to

clean up the venue after the rally dispersed. And yet, the Lahore deputy commissioner issued arrest orders for Prof Ammar Ali Jan, one of the rally organisers and president of the Haqooq-i-Khalq Movement, under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. According to the order, Prof Jan “if not checked will give rise to a situation prejudicial to public safety and maintenance of public order”. The document further describes him as being “in the habit ... to harass the general public and symbol of frightens [sic]”.

Notwithstanding the unfortunate turn of phrase, the attempt to paint Mr Jan as some notorious thug wishing to provoke an insurrection is ridiculous and makes the authorities look rather foolish. At the rally, the young professor assailed university administrations for promoting a fascist culture where critical thinking was stifled and teachers who encouraged their students to voice independent views were shown the door. According to him, students, farmers, labourers and civil society would have to work for a socialist revolution to take back the rights that capitalism had snatched from them. This scarcely catapults him into the ranks of those wishing to dismantle the state through violent means like a latter-day Guy Fawkes. Prof Jan and the rally participants were simply exercising their right to peaceful protest in what increasingly appears to be a nominal democracy, judging by the orders to arrest him. The fact is, there is in Pakistan today little tolerance for progressive ideas, because they make for a ‘troublesome’ populace that refuses to sacrifice its rights and freedoms at the altar of narratives that serve only a select few. Many decades ago, a student movement changed the course of history in Pakistan. Are the authorities afraid this is a nascent march on the same path? Such heavy-handed tactics are the shortest route to that end.

Internal divisions

EVEN as the Islamic world’s top diplomats met recently in Niamey, Niger, under the umbrella of the OIC’s Council of Foreign Ministers, to present a united face to the world, it was obvious that narratives were changing within the Muslim bloc. The good news is that despite the omission of the Kashmir question in the OIC’s agenda, it appears that Pakistan has managed to score a major diplomatic victory.

On Saturday, the Foreign Office, issued a press release stating the OIC had unanimously adopted a resolution that condemned Indian tactics in the held

region. Before the two-day event, the Foreign Office had rubbished the notion that the Kashmir issue would not be taken up, blaming it on “false Indian propaganda”.

Even then, there had been doubts; in August, Pakistan’s foreign minister had shown signs of impatience at the OIC’s delay in convening a foreign ministers’ meeting on Kashmir. In February, Prime Minister Imran Khan, during a visit to Malaysia, had himself spoken of divisions over the matter of Kashmir. Indeed, with India’s unlawful annexation of the disputed territory, and the worsening persecution of the Kashmiris, resolutions alone won’t do, and the OIC must take strong steps to draw the attention of world to the oppression and cruelty that reigns in the occupied land.

Meanwhile, divisions could be seen in other aspects; for instance, an official from Iran’s foreign ministry pointed to the growing bonhomie between Israel and some Arab nations on the verge of establishing formal relations with the Jewish state. Suspicious of Tel Aviv’s designs for decades now, the killing of yet another nuclear scientist near Tehran on Friday has led to Iranian allegations of an Israeli hand in the murder.

Many quarters have also linked the UAE’s recent decision to stop issuing new visas to citizens of a number of Muslim countries, including Pakistan, to the Emirates’ efforts to come closer to Israel. Not least among those concerned have been the Palestinians who see no hope for their future at a time when even their Arab brethren are leaving them at the mercy of an Israeli state that is expanding Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian land besides resorting to brutal tactics against the Arab population. This is especially ironic when we consider that one of the OIC’s founding principles was to defend the Palestinian cause.

Muslim states talk of unity and rightly denounce Islamophobia which is gaining ground as right-wing forces leave no stone unturned to persecute Muslims and denigrate their religious and cultural beliefs. Ideally, the 57-member Islamic bloc should be a bulwark against the obscurantism that is now taking hold of the Western world. But its strength can only come from internal unity. While each member country has its own aspirations, it is the collective goal of a peaceful Islamic world that should set the tone for the OIC’s actions.

Moving from the margins

THE recently reported story of Nisha Rao, Pakistan's first transgender lawyer, is both heartbreaking and inspiring. Like so many from the trans community, Nisha ran away from home and was forced to beg on the streets to make ends meet. For some time, she stood at traffic lights and begged in order to survive, but was determined to forge a new path for herself. As she earned enough to pay for law classes, she enrolled at school, earned a degree and licence, and this year joined the Karachi Bar Association. She now works with an NGO to fight for transgender rights, and is expanding her client base to include persons outside her community.

Nisha's happy ending is no doubt uplifting. Yet for all her success and ambition, the early years of her independence were fraught with hardship. Social stigmas and systemic discrimination have pushed the trans community in Pakistan into begging and the sex trade for decades — options that trans people like Nisha are compelled to consider if they come out to their families and get shunned as a result. The abuse, harassment and judgement that trans people are subjected to are harrowing; not only are these people the victims of terrible violence, they are even denied space in morgues. In these circumstances, the fact that Pakistan became one of a few countries in the world to pass legislation protecting the rights of transgender people in 2018 is a ray of hope — and a testament to how hard the community has fought to be heard and recognised. In enshrining an individual's right to determine their gender, the state made a historic decision to safeguard the rights of the community. But the road ahead is a long one. Trans people still face serious discrimination and violence, and are far from being represented in all walks of life. The government must continue to support the trans community and work on a public-awareness campaign that sensitises people about gender identity. Like Nisha, trans people should be represented across professions and given respect in keeping with their constitutional rights.